

What Stalin Knew: The Enigma of Barbarossa

Intelligence in Recent Public Literature

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Reviewed by Donald P. Steury

The German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 was one of the pivotal events of the 20th century. It transformed the Second World War and led, perhaps inevitably, to the Cold War and the half-century domination of Eastern Europe by the Soviet Union. It was, furthermore, one of the most brutal campaigns of modern times, bringing unspeakable atrocities and the near-annihilation of whole nationalities. The Nazis probably bear the principal responsibility for the character of the campaign, but the Soviet regime must shoulder some of the blame.

The sheer enormity of the event long has cried out for explanation on the strategic, political, economic, and even cultural level. At the heart is the question of why it happened at all. Why did Hitler attack the Soviet Union, thereby virtually abandoning his war with Britain and France at the very moment that he seemed about to achieve victory? Why did the attack come as such a surprise to the Soviet Union? How was Stalin, the canny, ruthless *Realpolitiker* in Moscow, flummoxed by the half-crazed ideologue in Berlin? Why did Stalin ignore the yearlong military buildup in eastern Europe and the (by one count) 87 separate, credible intelligence warnings of the German invasion that he received during 1940–41?

Hitler's decision is probably best explained by reference to his belief that all of history is a life-or-death struggle between races; his assumption of the innate superiority of the "Nordic" (e. g., German) races; and his determination to create a vast, German-dominated autarchical agrarian empire in central and eastern Europe.

Stalin's corresponding blindness to all this is more problematic. Hitler's foreign policy aims were well known, and it is difficult to comprehend how any national leader could do so little to anticipate the onslaught that everyone knew must come. Stalin's thinking in this regard has been the subject of a longstanding historical debate, not yet resolved—and perhaps not capable of resolution, for the fundamental issue is not what Stalin did or said, but what he *believed*.

David Murphy's book is the latest in the growing corpus of literature surrounding this debate. Murphy's contribution is virtually unique, however. Whereas other historians have looked at Stalin's *actions* and sought the reasoning behind them, Murphy examines the *intelligence* received by Stalin—in other words, as the title of the book suggests, "what Stalin knew."^[1] The author, a retired CIA officer, is supported in this by the publication of three collections of Soviet documents on state policy in the period leading up to the war and the activities of the security and intelligence services. Admittedly selective, these collections nonetheless add considerably to our understanding of the period.

In something of a surprise, Murphy reprints two secret letters from Hitler to Stalin that he found in the published Russian sources, hitherto unknown in the West. In these, the Führer seeks to reassure the Soviet dictator about the scarcely concealable German military buildup in eastern Europe. Hitler confides to Stalin that troops were being moved east to protect them from British bombing and to conceal the preparations for the invasion of the British Isles. He concludes with an assurance "on my honor as a head of state" that Germany would not attack the Soviet Union.^[2] Some may question the authenticity of these letters, but they are difficult to dismiss out of hand. Assuming they are genuine, they add to what is perhaps the most bewildering paradox of the Soviet-German war: Stalin, the man who trusted no one, trusted Hitler.

The importance of Murphy's contribution to the ongoing historical debate becomes clear when it is set in context. There is something more here than a discussion of what Stalin did and thought. What is, on one level, a dialogue between historians, is, on another, a matter of immense political

importance for extremists in both Germany and the former Soviet Union who seek to justify the actions of past, discredited regimes. At the heart of the dispute are an article and a book by “Viktor Suvorov,” a pseudonym for a former Soviet staff officer now resident in the West. Suvorov argues that the German attack on the Soviet Union only just preempted a planned Soviet attack on the German Reich. In support of this thesis, he points to the buildup of Soviet troops on the border with German-occupied territory in 1941 and the strategic doctrine of the Red Army, which eschewed defense in favor of a rapid, echeloned offense.[3] In Germany, Stalin’s supposed planned offensive has been seen by some right-wing elements as a validation of Hitler’s decision to attack eastward. A preventative war makes sense of an action that is, on many levels, otherwise strategically inexplicable. Since this is a discussion of a book about Stalin and the Soviet Union, the German debate need not detain us further, save to note that Russian extremists have put forward a mirror image of the German argument: Stalin, realizing he was about to be attacked by Hitler, mobilized his army on the border for a preemptive assault.[4]

Certainly the point of dispute here—Stalin’s forward deployment of his military forces—did not make sense from a purely defensive viewpoint. The imprudence of this action was shown early on the morning of 22 June 1941, when German units punched through the Soviet lines and encircled hundreds of thousands of troops, while the Luftwaffe pulverized the Soviet air force on the ground. On the other hand, few historians would argue that the Soviet military—ill-equipped, ill-supplied, and decimated by the Stalinist purges—was prepared for a grand strategic offensive against the Third Reich. As Franz Halder, chief of the German general staff, said, in explaining the rationale for Operation BARBAROSSA, “After all, we cannot expect them to do us the favor of attacking.”[5]

Historian Gabriel Gorodetsky has advanced the Russian interpretation that the “State Frontiers Defense Plan 1941,” which put Soviet troops on the borders, was intended as “a demonstration of force” rather than an attempt to “safeguard security.” Stalin, who was not, after all, hopelessly dim, regarded the period of enforced peace after the Hitler-Stalin pact as an opportunity to build up and reorganize the Soviet military while Germany was busy in the west. The occupied areas of Finland, the Baltic states, Poland, and Belarus, no less than the forward-deployed troops, were seen as a barrier behind which this military preparation could be accomplished.[6]

Gorodetsky’s argument dovetails nicely with the story told by David

Murphy. Murphy massively documents the in-pouring of intelligence from all over Europe and even Japan, warning of the German military buildup for invasion. Insofar as this intelligence was used at all, it was to avoid any action that might be seen as a provocation. German aircraft were allowed to fly reconnaissance missions deep into Soviet territory; German troops were allowed to violate Soviet borders in search of intelligence. All this was intended to remind the Germans of the depth of Soviet resolve, while demonstrating that the Soviet Union was not about to attack. Moreover, Stalin was absolutely convinced that Hitler would attempt nothing until he had resolved his conflict with Great Britain. He was encouraged in this preconception by a well-orchestrated German deception operation—including the two letters to Stalin—that was, at least in part, personally directed by Hitler. Thus it was that Stalin was able to ignore the massive military buildup on his borders and to dismiss every warning of a German attack as disinformation or provocation, right up until the morning of 22 June.

In describing how intelligence was collected and reported to Moscow, Murphy chillingly documents what it meant to be an intelligence officer under Stalin by following the careers of three men. NKVD foreign intelligence chief, Pavel Fitin, whose agents reported on German plans for BARBAROSSA right up to the attack, served throughout the war, but was in disgrace afterward. Ivan Proskurov, an air force officer and head of military intelligence during 1939–40, insisted on telling the truth to Stalin. He was shot in October 1941. Proskurov's successor, Filipp I. Golikov, suppressed or altered intelligence reporting that did not meet the Soviet dictator's preconceptions. He prospered under Stalin.

If one were looking for fault in Murphy's analysis, one might accuse him of too uncritically accepting all the intelligence provided to Stalin as warning of the German attack. Assessing intelligence is seldom as cut and dried as it might seem and, although there certainly was ample documentation of German intentions, not everything that might seem to point in that direction necessarily did. German troop movements in July 1940 were not necessarily related to a German attack; nor was Hitler's visit to Gotenhafen (Polish Gdynia) and East Prussia in May 1941, during which time he visited the battleships Bismarck and Tirpitz. There was considerable complexity to German troop movements in eastern Europe, as I have argued elsewhere.[7] Some warnings, such as that delivered by the German ambassador to Moscow, Graf von der Schulenberg, were nothing short of bizarre. And Stalin had no particular reason to trust either Churchill or Roosevelt when they tried to alert him to what was to come. If anything,

this kind of reporting only fed Stalin's conspiratorial frame of mind: Once he was convinced that there was a conspiracy afoot to deceive him about German intentions, even the slightest ambiguity or whiff of ulterior motive only confirmed his belief in the breadth and depth of the conspiracy. Yet, there can be no doubt that Murphy is correct both in detail and in the sum and substance of his argument: Stalin was well-served by his intelligence departments. The responsibility for ignoring that intelligence was his and his alone.

In closing, it is worth noting that there was another failure of judgment in BARBAROSSA, that of Adolf Hitler. Hitler, like Stalin, was a victim of his own preconceptions, but, in contrast to Stalin, he was ill-served by his intelligence services. Suffering from what the Japanese, from bitter experience, would call "victory disease," the Germans overestimated their own capabilities, even as they underestimated the Soviet capacity to resist. In July 1942, one year after the start of the campaign, Hitler admitted as much to Marshal Carl Gustav Mannerheim, the Finnish military leader, on a visit to Helsinki—Finland then being a cobelligerent with Germany in its war with the Soviet Union. "We did not ourselves understand— just how strong this state [the ussr] was armed," Hitler told him, "If somebody had told me a nation could start with 35,000 tanks, then I'd have said, 'You are crazy!' . . . [Yet] . . . We have destroyed—right now—more than 34,000 tanks It was unbelievable I had no idea of it. If I had an idea—then it would have been more difficult for me, but I would have taken the decision to invade anyhow" [8] History does not record Marshal Mannerheim's reaction.

Footnotes:

[1]David Murphy is not the first to have done this. Barton Whaley's seminal *Codeword BARBAROSSA* (Cambridge, MA, and London: The MIT Press, 1973) asked similar questions, but Whaley had nothing like Murphy's access to Soviet materials.

[2]Murphy, 258.

[3]Viktor Suvorov, "Who was Planning to Attack Whom in June 1941, Hitler or Stalin?" *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute* (June 1985), and *Icebreaker: Who Started the Second World War* (London: 1990).

[4]For pro-Suvorov discussions see V. Sokolov, "Did Stalin Intend to Attack

Hitler?" *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* (June 1998), and Joachim Hoffman, "The Soviet Union's Offensive Preparations in 1941" in Bernd Wegner, ed., *From Peace to War: Germany, Soviet Russia and the World, 1939–1945* (Providence, RI, and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1997).

[5] Charles Burdick and Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, eds., *The Halder War Diaries* (Novato, CA: The Presidio Press, 1988), 263.

[6] Gabriel Gorodetsky, "Stalin and Hitler's Attack on the Soviet Union" in Wegner, ed., *From Peace to War*, 346.

[7] Donald P. Steury, "Too Much Is Not Enough: Joseph Stalin, British Intelligence and Strategic Surprise in 1941," *Studies in Intelligence* 42, no. 2 (1998).

[8] Bernd Wegner, "Hitlers Besuch in Finnland 1942 (Dokumentation)," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 43, no. 1 (1993), 131–32.

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