

Stalin as Soviet War Leader in 1941: Myths and Realities

Of the leaders of the wartime alliance against Hitler's Germany, none played a more decisive or controversial role than Joseph Stalin. While Winston Churchill's record in 1940, when after the defeat of France Britain stood alone against Nazi Germany, has been criticized by those who thought it was in Britain's interests to make peace with Germany; and even today features in the debate about the rights and wrong of Britain's exit from the European Union; and while Roosevelt's supposed manipulation of US intelligence has been seen by some as part of a strategy for winning American support for war against Germany and Japan in 1941; nothing compares with the accusations levelled at Stalin for miscalculating Hitler's intentions in summer 1941, and for the devastating consequences of Operation Barbarossa, the massive attack on the USSR launched on 22 June.

The aim of this paper will be to assess Stalin's record as war leader in the months leading up to and following the German invasion. His role in nearly four years of continuous warfare on the Eastern front, while of immense historical interest, is too substantial for a short paper. But the early period of the German-Soviet war is revealing not only for its epic character, but for the way it anticipated what was to come, and the reasons for the ultimate victory of the USSR and its Western Allies over Nazi Germany and the Axis. For this reason my paper will examine Hitler's motives in invading the USSR, Stalin's preparedness for resisting the German onslaught, and the consequences of Germany's defeat at the Battle of Moscow.

Keywords: Second World War, Eastern Front, Stalin, Barbarossa, Battle of Moscow

It has been often argued in Western historiography of World War II that the USSR was unprepared for war with Germany in 1941, and that the blame for this lay with Stalin and his underestimation of the threat of Nazism.¹ Nothing could be further from the truth. For Stalin the likelihood that imperialism, having failed to destroy the Bolshevik Revolution during the Russian Civil War, would one day renew its attempt to destroy Communism was ever-present in his analysis of international relations and dominated his geo-political thinking. It can well be argued that providing the USSR with advanced military industry and world-class military capacity was the prime motive for the forced industrialization drive he launched with the first Five Year Plan in 1928. And before the outbreak of war in Western Europe in September 1939 this goal had been achieved. The Soviet Union had a modern military-industrial system capable of producing weapons of international quality, had mastered their mass production, and had the largest army in the world.²

But what was the source of the most likely external threat to the USSR's security? In the 1920s and early 1930s it was assumed to come from Britain, France and Poland; but the situation changed with Hitler's accession to power as German Chancellor in 1933. With his rabid anti-Communism and his declared goal of achieving 'living space' for Germany (by acquiring an empire in Eastern Europe that would provide resources equal to or greater than those of rival powers), Germany increasingly came to be seen by the Soviet leadership as posing the prime threat from the West, while worsening relations with Japan made it a potential enemy from the East. Hence the search for a collective front against fascism became the declared aim of Soviet foreign policy.³

The main impediment to this in Europe was the appeasement policy towards Germany pursued by Britain and France. This reached its apex at the Munich

conference in 1938, and even after Hitler had broken the agreements reached there by occupying Sudetenland, Britain and France were reluctant to form an alliance with the Soviet Union to confront Germany's ever more expansionist policies. The dilatory nature of the steps taken by them to negotiate an alliance with the USSR in the summer of 1939 was not lost on Stalin. The result was the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of August 1939, and the consequent partition of Poland between Germany and the USSR. A week later Britain and France declared war on Germany, and the Second World War had begun. A few months later under the Pact's secret clauses the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were absorbed into the USSR; and the following year the USSR went to war with Finland to gain territory to defend Leningrad. This was a bitterly and by the Red Army initially incompetently fought war which did nothing to enhance the USSR's reputation as a military power, despite its ultimate victory.⁴

For nearly two years Germany and the USSR, while not allies, mutually benefitted from their pact in trade and other forms of cooperation. While it enabled Germany to give its full attention to the war on the Western front, in the process defeating France in a few weeks in May 1940 and forcing Britain to evacuate its army from Dunkirk, the USSR took full advantage of the opportunity to accelerate further the growth of its military output and to increase the size of its armed forces. By 1941 these had reached five million, the largest army in the world.

Was the German-Soviet Pact a disastrous mistake on Stalin's part as some have argued, or was he buying time to prepare for a war he believed was inevitable? Did he think war between Germany and Britain would reduce the danger of either going to war with the USSR, and so enhance the latter's ability to defend itself? Stalin was no fool. It is a myth that he trusted Hitler to abide by the terms of their Pact

indefinitely. He saw as well as anyone the attraction to Germany of gaining access to the huge Soviet human, agricultural and industrial resources. The question was not whether but when Germany would make substantial demands on Soviet territory, and when faced with Soviet refusal to grant them, war would result. ⁵

The evidence now available indicates that Stalin expected war with Germany in 1942-43. In his view it would take until then for Germany to force Britain to come to terms. Before Britain's defeat he believed it impossible that Hitler would attack the Soviet Union and repeat Germany's fatal error in World War I of fighting a war on two fronts. On the other hand we know from a variety of sources that by December 1940 Hitler was well aware of the growth of Soviet military strength and the need to eliminate any potential threat from the USSR before the defeat of what he took to be his major enemy, Britain and its empire. He therefore ordered his high command to prepare for a massive campaign, Operation Barbarossa, to be launched against the USSR in May 1941.

It is now well established that via Soviet intelligence, British intelligence, German deserter, foreign diplomats and other informers, Stalin was warned of the possibility of invasion. It is also now known that he dismissed this as false information designed to lure the USSR into war on Britain's side against Germany. Despite the increasing evidence of German preparations for the invasion of the USSR, it would be only a few hours before Operation Barbarossa began that Stalin allowed Zhukov and Timoshenko to issue orders to front line forces alerting them to the possibility of a German attack, to take defensive measures, and to be ready to counterattack (as Soviet propaganda had long declared would be the Soviet answer to invasion by any foreign power). ⁶

There is no doubt that Stalin's refusal to accept warnings of a German invasion resulted in huge losses of Red Army men and vast quantities of planes, tanks and war equipment in general as the Wehrmacht advanced into Soviet territory at an astonishing speed. Nothing can excuse Stalin for his catastrophic underestimate of the possibility of a German attack, for the resulting huge loss of life, territory and armaments, and for the tragic fate of the large numbers of prisoners of war and civilians in occupied regions.⁷

At the same time certain points have to be made about the information Stalin failed to act on. First it was hearsay. Reports and rumours of impending invasion may have come from well-informed sources, but to the skeptical Stalin they were not proof of German intentions. No captured German war plans or instructions fell into Soviet hands before Operation Barbarossa was launched. Second Stalin had reason to doubt Churchill's motives for warning of an impending German invasion given that he led an isolated and besieged Britain in desperate need of an ally. And third a substantial amount of false intelligence was disseminated by the Germans to conceal their intentions from the USSR. The huge concentration of German forces close to the border with the Soviet Union was supposedly to keep them safe from British air attack during German preparations for a renewal of Operation Sea Lion, the planned invasion of Britain first attempted during the Battle of Britain in summer 1940.

For all this there was ample circumstantial evidence that Hitler would attack the Soviet Union: Hitler's belief that Britain was Germany's prime enemy, that the Red Army had been irreparably damaged by Stalin's purges in 1937-8, and that the Soviet-Finnish war had appeared to show the Red Army's limited capacity for war, particularly against the more experienced Wehrmacht, fresh from its stunning victory over the French army in 1940, hitherto regarded as the most powerful fighting force in

Europe. These beliefs were equally shared by Hitler and his High Command in summer 1941.

It has been argued that following the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Stalin had failed to move sufficient Red Army forces to the new German-Soviet border, that the speed of the German advance into the USSR would have been slower and more effectively combatted had they been opposed by large forces on the Soviet side, and had the Soviet side of the new border been adequately fortified, as Zhukov and Timoshenko had unavailingly advocated. This is doubtful. Given the surprise attack by the Germans and the massive scale of the invasion (the largest in history), the result would probably have been an even greater number of Soviet dead or of prisoners, whose fate as POWs would have been dire in the extreme.

The conventional account of Operation Barbarossa is one of heavy defeats for encircled Soviet armies, victory after victory for triumphant Wehrmacht commanders, chaotic retreats by Red Army units, and a disastrous lack of coordination between the Soviet high command and Soviet armies in combat. Despite heroic resistance from many Red Army units, desertion and surrender was common. To which was often added Stalin's withdrawal from command of the Soviet war effort in the first days of the war as a result of a nervous breakdown. Now that we have access to the detailed diaries of his meetings kept by the omnipresent Poskrebyshchev, we know that in the first week of the war Stalin met with the political, military, economic and administrative elite for hours on end, and that the resulting decrees put the Soviet Union on the war footing that years of mobilization plans and practice had prepared it for. Orders for the evacuation of factories and skilled personnel to the Urals and further east were being issued from day 1 of the war, and despite the inevitable chaos

and disorganization that often accompanied this process it would make the extraordinary recovery of Soviet military industry and output in 1942 possible.

Stalin's meetings diaries show two days, 28-29 June, when he retired to the Near dacha, exhausted and depressed by the news from the front, particularly the fall of Minsk on 27 June, and was to all intents and purposes out of contact. On 30 June he received an unsolicited visit from his innermost circle (including Molotov, Malenkov, Beria, Kaganovich and Mikoyan). Legend has it, based on Mikoyan's mention of the meeting in his memoirs, that Stalin feared they had come to demand his resignation. This is another myth. In fact this aspect of the story appears to have been a later addition to the account of the meeting, possibly added by Mikoyan's son. What the record clearly shows is that the reason for the group's visit was to propose the establishment of a war cabinet, the Government Defense Committee, a body to which all party, state and military organizations would be responsible. When Stalin asked who would chair it, the unanimous answer of those present was he himself. Their answer was not motivated by fear of the consequences of disloyalty. In the desperate situation the Soviet Union was in they knew that Stalin was the only one with the ability, experience and strength to lead it. No-one else had his ability to provide the leadership required for waging total war.

And in the days that followed other key roles was added to his responsibilities, including Commissar for Defense, chair of Stavka (the newly established high command), and chair of the council of people's commissars. All lines of responsibility for the Soviet war effort from now until the end of the war would run to Stalin. None of the other war leaders, including Hitler, would combine such a range of responsibilities.

The fact remains that Red Army suffered huge losses of men and territory in summer 1941, and while German losses were far greater than their commanders had anticipated, Hitler and the German high command remained confident that they would capture the Soviet capital and force Stalin to sue for peace. In September the Germans captured Kiev and on 8 September cut Leningrad off from land contact with the rest of the country, condemning its population to a siege that would cause at least 800,000 of its civilians to die of from starvation or malnutrition. By the end of September the Wehrmacht was ready to launch Operation Typhoon to capture Moscow.⁸

For the Nazi leadership, despite the unexpectedly heavy casualties the Wehrmacht had taken, Germany had all but defeated the Soviet Union by autumn 1941. After the war its surviving generals would argue in their memoirs that had it not been for Hitler's decision in August to divert the main thrust of the German offensive to Kiev to gain control of Ukraine's rich industrial and agricultural resources, thus delaying for crucial weeks resumption of the drive to take Moscow, and the early onset of winter that caused immense difficulties for an army totally unprepared for fighting in such conditions, the capture of Moscow and Leningrad would have been inevitable, and with it the collapse of the Soviet Union.

What this overlooks is that Operation Barbarossa in summer 1941 had been far from an unbroken series of German victories. Wehrmacht military losses, though smaller than those of the Red Army, far exceeded German expectations, as did the loss of hitherto invincible military units, including the supposedly invincible Panzer divisions. Given the scale of German losses, the impact of the Soviet counter-offensives relentlessly ordered by Stalin despite their frequent failure and heavy cost, and the scorched earth policy ruthlessly applied as the Red Army retreated, it is not surprising that far from reaching Moscow within a few weeks as Hitler and the

German high command had expected at the outset of Operation Barbarossa, by the time they did conditions for fighting were deteriorating fast. That a few German units may have seen through their binoculars the cupulas of Kremlin cathedrals meant nothing when the task of taking a now heavily defended city remained to be accomplished. Still more was this the case when it became clear to the Germans that while the task of supplying reinforcements and much needed food and fuel supplies to their forces were being increasingly undermined by the actions of Soviet partisans, Stalin could and did bring reserves to the front in quantities and equipped to a degree that German intelligence had totally failed to predict.

The fact is that by the time the Wehrmacht came within reach of launching an offensive to capture the Soviet capital, the strategy of blitzkrieg on which the success of Operation Barbarossa was based had failed.⁹ What had brought the Germans victory in Belgium, France and Poland bore no resemblance to the conditions they now faced in the Soviet Union. Stalin's refusal to leave Moscow despite ordering the evacuation of much of the government and party apparatus in October, his introduction of martial law to combat panic on the part of the population, including elite officials, his imposition of the highest measure of punishment, namely execution, for Red Army officers and men found guilty of cowardice or desertion (over 10000 executions had taken place by early October, a third in front of the offenders' own comrades, according to a report from Beria to Stalin), his acceptance of Zhukov's assurance that the Red Army could hold Moscow, and his appearance and speech at the Red Square parade on 7 November, not to speak of the 27000 Red Army men who went directly from the parade to the front line, all demonstrated to the Soviet population, allies and enemies alike Stalin's determination to spare no effort and make any sacrifice to repel the German invasion.¹⁰

A month later, after weeks of military stalemate, Zhukov launched a huge offensive at the beginning of December, forcing the Wehrmacht to retreat up to 200 kilometers from Moscow, and in so doing inflicted the first land defeat on Nazi Germany in World War II, the myth of German invincibility had been destroyed.

The words of General Franz Halder, Chief of Staff of the Wehrmacht, written in the aftermath of the battle of Moscow, convey its impact. The situation, he wrote, “all along the front can only be described as a disaster. The Russians attacked with a million fresh Siberian troops! We were stunned thinking no such troops existed. The front was punctured over and over sending our army reeling backwards. If it wasn't for the discipline of the German soldier, and Hitler's iron will, a complete debacle would have ensued comparable to the Napoleonic retreat. A war that looked good as won six months earlier was now in peril.”

And later, looking back, Halder wrote “There would be another summer of victories, but the MYTH of the invincibility of the German Army had been smashed forever!”¹¹

Victory at Moscow was a vital turning point in another important way. It put to rest doubts among the Soviet Union's Western allies about its capacity to survive the war of annihilation and extermination Hitler had unleashed upon it confident it would doom the Soviet Union to destruction. While Britain and the USA provided military and other aid to the Soviet Union through the Arctic convoys to Archangel and Murmansk from soon after the German invasion, and while Lend-Lease would by 1943 make a significant contribution to the Soviet war effort, there were for months doubts among some of the military and political elite of both countries about the viability of an alliance with the Soviet Union. Had Moscow fallen to the Germans it is far from clear that the alliance would have held together.

In the event the Soviet victory at Moscow showed beyond any doubt that the USSR was a formidable ally and a vital partner in the task of destroying fascism. As in any alliance there would be tensions and disagreements, above all over the opening of a Second Front, first promised in 1942 but not realized until June 1944.¹² But whereas the Axis never functioned as more than a vehicle for Nazi strategy and propaganda (and in the case of Japan was of no benefit to Germany's partners whatsoever), the 'grand alliance' as Churchill called it enabled Roosevelt, Stalin and he himself not only to represent the common interests of their peoples in destroying fascism, but to cooperate in the creation of a new structure for international security in the post-war world, namely the United Nations. It would take well over two more years of fighting and the death of millions more victims of Nazi aggression before peace would be achieved. But the Soviet Union's victory at Moscow showed that given unity among nations willing to and capable of resisting aggression, fascism could be defeated.

The lessons for today could not be greater.

References.

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⁵ For a definitive analysis of Stalin's policy towards Germany in the years preceding Barbarossa, see Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin, vol II: Waiting for Hitler* (New York, 2017)

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¹¹ Cited in Wikiquote https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Franz_Halder. For a revealing record of the changing attitude of the Wehrmacht high command during the Battle for Moscow, see *The Halder Diaries: the Private War Journals of Colonel General Franz Halder*, 2 vols, (Colorado, 1976)

¹² For an invaluable portrayal of the dynamics of the alliance, see David Reynolds & Vladimir Pechatnov, *The Kremlin Letters: Stalin's Wartime Correspondence with Churchill and Roosevelt* (London, 2018)