

Review article

Stalin and the German invasion of Russia 1941: a failure of reasons of state?

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It is increasingly the case in studies of Russia that those who specialize in domestic social and economic history ignore the impact of foreign affairs in their analyses, preferring instead to explain the development of the Soviet Union, in particular, entirely within the confines of their own narrow specialism.

To the informed observer this apparently wilful myopia may seem strange. The October revolution was almost strangled in the cradle by an allied war of intervention in 1918–19—a result of foreign policy decisions made in London and Paris. The background to, and no small part of the explanation for, the decision to industrialize Russia at speed, which cast the future of the Soviet Union in the Stalinist mould, was the simultaneous fear of war generated jointly and by no means entirely fortuitously by Polish expansionism and the spectre of the threat of war from Britain in 1926–7. Not long after, the launching of the Great Terror in 1936 was not completely unconnected with the apparent rise of the Trotskyists in the ‘*événements*’ of Paris that June and the re-emergence of revolutionary internationalist sentiment in Moscow in reaction to the rise of fascism in Spain later that summer. The purge trials that followed were littered with so-called evidence indicting the accused in terms of their supposed links with the fascist powers. The outbreak of war and its disastrous consequences for Soviet society were obviously a product of international relations, as was the Cold War, which effectively stultified the evolution of Russian society and economy for decades to come.

In the light of this, one might have thought it possible that the social and economic circumstances of Soviet Russia were more the product of its international position rather than the reverse. Recognition of this fact would, of course, require that social and economic historians at the very least took due account of the findings of specialists in the Soviet Union’s foreign relations and most certainly regarded researchers in this troubled and difficult field as at least on a par with themselves. But there is absolutely no sign of this happening. Rather the reverse. All this might occasion a modest doubt in the minds of the disinterested layman: what kind of world are such blinkered historians living in?

We therefore have no cause to apologize for devoting an entire review article to an important work on the origins of the Great Patriotic War.¹ Its well-published author, Gabriel Gorodetsky, will be widely known to students of the history of Soviet foreign policy for his pioneering and carefully crafted work on the crisis in Anglo-Soviet relations that occurred between 1924 and 1927,² and his vivid account of Stafford Cripps' mission to Moscow from 1940 to 1941.³ Both works were based on painstaking research and documentation from the archives of the Foreign Office in London in addition to the Soviet diplomatic documents published at the time of writing

Gorodetsky's approach focused largely, though never exclusively, on the level of state-to-state relations and thus dealt predominantly with the reactive dimension of Soviet foreign policy which represented the dimension of national interest rather than the more provocative, revolutionary dimension epitomised in the policies of the Communist International (Comintern).

In this respect Gorodetsky was writing, as was his early mentor, E. H. Carr, very much in reaction to the climate of orthodox Cold War historiography which had hitherto highlighted Moscow as the cause of almost every conceivable contemporary international discontent. Throughout Gorodetsky's work, the meticulous attention to detail uncovered evidence of considerable value to those who did not share his perspective just as much as for those who did.

In more recent years he became deeply embroiled in a gladiatorial contest with a former Soviet intelligence analyst, who has written under the pseudonym Suvorov, concerning the origins of the Great Patriotic War of 1941–5. The claim made originally by Field Marshal Keitel and subsequently reiterated by Suvorov⁴ that Hitler, in launching Operation Barbarossa on 22 June 1941, pre-empted a Soviet attack always was, to say the least, a piece of dubious special pleading on behalf of a lost cause. The reason for its unheralded appearance is not hard to explain. The interpretation proved a godsend to Germans, now freed from postwar constraints, who hoped to place Hitler back into the pantheon of patriotic history. Equally, in Moscow the appearance of *Icebreaker* at a time of the collapse of communist power and the emergence of extreme anti-communist polemic found ready acceptance, particularly among those desperate to jettison the uncomfortable associations of the past. In rebutting this case Gorodetsky recently published a polemic in Russian.⁵ Now he has appeared in print in both Russian and English, with a much more substantially researched work on the period based on documents from all but two of the key collections in Moscow and certainly all that would oblige him in the course of his research.

¹ G. Gorodetsky, *Grand delusion: Stalin and the German invasion of Russia* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999) p. xiv and p. 408.

² G. Gorodetsky, *The precarious truce: Anglo-Soviet relations 1924–7* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

³ G. Gorodetsky, *Stafford Cripps' mission to Moscow* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

⁴ V. Suvorov, *Icebreaker: who started the Second World War?* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1990).

⁵ G. Gorodetsky, *Mif 'Ledokola': nakamune voiny* (Moscow: Progress-Akademiya, 1995).

Gorodetsky has produced a rich and rewarding book. The reward lies not only in the skilful disentangling of highly complex diplomatic manoeuvres but also in the very questions he raises about the nature of Soviet foreign policy as a whole. It is by no means essential to agree with it all. The specific conclusions are, first, that Suvorov is wrong: Stalin resolutely ruled out a pre-emptive attack on Germany. Moreover, all the evidence shows that Stalin was indeed utterly unprepared for the invasion when it finally came on 22 June 1941. With a wealth of illustration from both published and unpublished Russian intelligence documents, Gorodetsky shows how Stalin jumped to conclusions based on logical deduction—why should Hitler make the fatal mistake of launching a war on two fronts?—instead of relying on the findings of agents in the field. Second, instead of focusing exclusively or largely on the Germans, their intentions and capabilities, Stalin—unlikely as it may now seem—became deeply and ultimately fatally distracted by what may appear to us an entirely irrational obsession with the presumed danger from imperial Britain. A third element in Gorodetsky's thesis is that the Balkans was the key to explaining why Hitler attacked the Soviet Union: this was the focal point towards which the competing spheres of influence of both Moscow and Berlin were drawn and where they ultimately collided.

These specific conclusions lead on to larger questions and draw Gorodetsky on to larger conclusions, the most important of which is summed up in the opening paragraph of his final chapter:

Stalin was little affected by sentiment or ideology in the pursuit of foreign policy. His statesmanship was rooted in Russia's tsarist legacy, and responded to imperatives deep within its history...it would be a mistake to attribute Soviet foreign policy in the wake of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact either to the whims of a tyrant or to relentless ideological expansionism...Stalin's policy appears to have been rational and level-headed...

If we unpack these points, we find a Stalin ruled by the 'reason and practice of states' in the tradition originally expounded by Guicciardini. We find a Stalin shaped by historical currents in the tradition of Catherine the Great and Alexander I. We find a Stalin fully capable of separating out the manner of conducting foreign policy from the ruthless imposition of tyranny at home. We find a Stalin who defiantly rejected the international revolutionary imperative that Lenin and Trotsky both felt bound to respect. Above all we have a Stalin who was 'rational and level-headed'. This line, which is most certainly the most controversial of all, is reinforced in one of the last footnotes in Gorodetsky's book, where Henry Kissinger is approvingly quoted as saying Stalin was 'the supreme realist—patient, shrewd, and implacable, the Richelieu of the period'.

Any attempt to sum up Stalin in this manner is bound to excite both admiration and scepticism. Stalin has come to us in many forms, and it might be argued that the reason is not wholly attributable to the conflicting emotions that arise in writing of such a controversial figure, but is also due in part to the tremendous challenge presented by his very make-up. There is at root a degree

of complexity and impenetrability that Stalin shares with other acute tacticians in history—not least the above-mentioned Cardinal Richelieu, but also such figures as David Lloyd George, Franklin Roosevelt, Adolf Hitler, and Mikhail Gorbachev. None closest to any of these figures ever knew their true beliefs. All represent an immense challenge to even the most perspicacious biographer. The element of evanescent intangibility integral to any political personality is here enlarged to the point of vapid abstraction. In short, one is unlikely to capture the essence of the man as statesman merely from documents of state. Documents of state will necessarily present such a man as statesman. We have to look beyond to find the inner man. But since Stalin wiped out those closest to him or lost others through untimely suicide, he has certainly made this a difficult, if not impossible, task. Gorodetsky obtained a very small sample of the documents from the Stalin papers, which are only now being transferred for (restricted) scholarly access to the archives. Furthermore, even these papers still represent only Party and state documents. One might therefore be inclined to conclude that we are as far away from the inner Stalin as ever.

First, let us take the assumption that in the practice of *Realpolitik*, Stalin had no larger ends in mind. On this subject Gorodetsky cites Machiavelli as an example—‘Machiavelli rather than Lenin was Stalin’s idol’, we are told (p. 317). Yet, as Machiavelli himself shows, the conduct of *Realpolitik* by no means rules out the pursuit of ultimate aims. In his case, Italian unification. In the case of the Bolsheviks, world revolution. Is it entirely to be ruled out, merely from files illustrative of purely operational diplomatic matters (whose finding aids we are still unable to consult) that Stalin had no larger ambitions apart from the tactical cut and thrust of his and Molotov’s largely statist foreign policy in 1939–41? Consult the Party archive for that critical period, and you will see in the confidential briefings to Party cadres the inner ideological dimension to the foreign policies Gorodetsky ascribes purely to reasons of state, namely the expansion of communist rule into neighbouring countries. Andrei Zhdanov, Politburo member and secretary of the Leningrad Party, argued that the ‘policy of a socialist government consists of using the contradictions between imperialists, in this particular case the military contradictions, in order to expand the position of socialism whenever the opportunity arises’.⁶ And fellow Politburo member, President Kalinin pointed out on the eve of the German attack that although war was ‘a very dangerous affair’ it was also a time ‘when it is possible to expand communism. This must not be forgotten.’⁷ Even the least revolutionary of Soviet diplomats, ambassador to London Ivan Maisky, repeatedly confided to his diary in September and October 1939 reflections as to whether a revolution was imminent in Nazi Germany in the near future. The delusions that Gorodetsky rightly and persuasively refers to in his study need complementing in this crucial respect.

⁶ Quoted by A. Nekrich, ‘The dynamism of the past’, J. Wiczynski, ed., *Operation Barbarossa* (Salt Lake City: Charles Schlaks Jr, 1993) pp. 232–3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

Trotsky also noticed and commented at length on the strange phenomenon of Soviet expansionism under Stalin. He compared Stalin to Napoleon. There could be no question that Napoleon represented the betrayal of the revolution within France. Yet he ended up extending its reach across the face of Europe. It was more than likely, Trotsky wrote, that:

in the regions which must become a component of the USSR, the Moscow government will take measures to expropriate the big property-owners and to nationalise the means of production. Such action is more likely not because the bureaucracy is true to the socialist programme, but because it does not wish to and is unable to share power and the privileges connected with it with the old ruling classes of the occupied regions. Here an analogy presents itself. The first Bonaparte brought the revolution to a halt with the aid of a military dictatorship. However, when French forces invaded Poland, Napoleon signed a decree: 'Serfdom is abolished.' This action was not dictated by Napoleon's sympathies for the peasants, but by the fact that the Bonapartist dictatorship rested not on feudal but on bourgeois property. Since Stalin's Bonapartist dictatorship rests not on private but on state property, the Red Army's invasion of Poland must virtually bring with it the liquidation of private capitalist property, in order thereby to bring the regime of the occupied territories into line with the regime in the USSR.⁸

When one considers what happened to the Baltic states in June 1940 and the whole of eastern Europe after occupation by the Red Army from 1944 to 1948, the idea that the entire reconstruction of the socio-economic and political order of the region was simply a matter of *Realpolitik* beggars belief. There was clearly something about the nature of the Soviet regime, as Trotsky suggests, if not about Stalin himself, which Trotsky would never have been able to admit, that brought these changes about.

If, however, we lay aside, for one moment, Trotsky's assumption that the critical element is the system of power rather than the man at its apex, and focus instead on the image of Stalin presented as rational, level-headed and largely devoid of subjection to ideological influence, we do encounter a puzzle; indeed, more than one. For this is the man who wiped out two-thirds of the entire officer corps at the very time Hitler was manoeuvring his way towards a bid for hegemony in Europe, and, indeed, at the very time, too, that the Japanese entered the final phase in their extended campaign to conquer China up to, and possibly ultimately across, Soviet borders. This was also the man who withdrew from the field and executed the flower of his foreign intelligence services, which resulted in the ludicrous position, throughout the fateful year of 1940, of having no contact with Soviet agents in London. This was at a time when Stalin's first priority was the execution of the harmless Trotsky in distant Mexico. These actions could in no way be seriously represented as the actions of a rational and level-headed mind, even accepting Gorodetsky's strange claim that the intelligence services 'remained very effective' in this crucial period (p. 321). The fundamentally irrational misperception of Britain under Churchill as a

⁸ 'SSSR v voine', *Byulleten' Opozitsii*, No. 79-80 (1939), p. 8.

threat to the Soviet Union, and Molotov's extraordinary claim that Hitler's takeover of Western Europe in the spring and early summer of 1940 was no threat to the balance of power in Europe require a larger and less generous explanation than we have before us. The odd thing is that Gorodetsky both relates 'the paranoiac atmosphere in the Kremlin' (p. 318) and insists on the rationality of decision-making. It would seem to most disinterested observers that the former precluded the latter.

It would be entirely plausible to portray the conduct of Soviet foreign policy during this period in terms of Stalin and Molotov's fundamental lack of understanding of the outside world, in which decisions were reached within a very narrow circle of intimates, deprived of the expertise such as that which the fallen Litvinov could offer, walled in by distorting mirrors of their own making, and ultimately destined to fail, regardless of the actions of both adversaries (Japan and Germany) and potential allies (Britain and the United States). The entire atmosphere was poisoned by a generalized distrust of all capitalist states—whether democratic or fascist it was deemed to make no difference—which was clearly ideological in its original formation. Insert within this the reinforcement of subordinates who feared to differ with fundamental assumptions held by a man who would shoot those he sensed stood substantially at variance with him, and you have a recipe for disaster. Within such a context no amount of clever tactical manoeuvre could ensure security, far less victory. It is, on this view, a critical mistake to treat decision-making in Moscow as in any sense 'normal' by current Western standards. The nearest equivalent atmosphere would be Spain at the time of the Inquisition.

It may be argued that this is where London got Moscow wrong. Throughout the war that followed, the assumption was that trust and goodwill had been established in the common cause against Hitler, and that this fund of cooperation could be drawn upon indefinitely into the postwar period. And this was a mistake made also by Litvinov, who pressed for postwar cooperation based on Western style spheres of influence, only to be ignored by Stalin and ultimately forced into attacking his own government in conversations with Western diplomats and journalists (monitored by Stalin). London had no idea that by late October 1942 Stalin would be writing to Maisky warning that 'All of us in Moscow are getting the impression that Churchill is sustaining a course towards the defeat of the USSR, in order to come to terms with the Germany of Hitler or Brüning at the expense of our country.'⁹ London also had no idea that at this time or soon thereafter Stalin and Molotov would agree that the future security of Russia and the interests of the international communist movement would require a postwar policy entirely independent of cooperation with the West, except entirely on Soviet terms. The price was ultimately paid in Russian as well as Western blood and in the ruination of many young lives. In

⁹ Stalin (Moscow) to Maisky (London), 19 October 1942: *Sovetsko-angliiskie otnosheniya vo vremya velikoi otechestvennoi voiny 1941-1945*, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Politizdat, 1983) p. 147.

this sense, rather than generalizing from the apparent rationality of Soviet foreign policy from 1939 to 1941, it might be better to see this period in terms also of what was going on at home as well as abroad, in terms of what followed, as well as what had come before; an example, perhaps, to our colleagues in social and economic history, as to the importance of seeing the Soviet Union in the round.

