

History of World War II: Operation Barbarossa. Did Stalin Foresee Hitler's Invasion?

Part I

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In attacking eastwards from June 1941 the Nazis intended to annex the Ukraine, all of European Russia, the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, while establishing a satellite Finnish nation to the north-east. A greatly enlarged Germany would thus be created, serving as a homeland for hundreds of millions of those belonging to the so-called Germanic and Nordic races. As envisaged by Nazi planners, this expansion would provide the economic base to sustain the thousand year Reich.

According to Adolf Hitler's Directive No. 18 issued on 12 November 1940, the goal of his eastern invasion was to occupy and hold a line from Archangel, in the far north-west of Russia, to Astrakhan, almost 1,300 miles southward; further conquering Leningrad, Moscow, the Donbas, Kuban (in southern Russia) and the Caucasus.

Nothing was mentioned as to what the Germans would do, once the Archangel-Astrakhan line had been reached. The Wehrmacht's objective was, however, to annihilate the Soviet forces in western Russia through massive armoured spearheads and encirclements, thereby preventing the Red Army's withdrawal further east.

It should be stated, firstly, that the USSR had no plans in 1940 or 1941 to attack Nazi Germany; nor did the Soviets hold ambitions to sweep across all of mainland Europe in a war of conquest. There really was no need for the world's largest state to take control of other vast continents.



David Glantz, the US military historian and retired colonel, realised that Soviet ruler Joseph Stalin's position in 1941 was that of a *defensive* one. Glantz wrote how, "Stalin was guilty of wishful thinking, of hoping to delay war for at least another year, in order to complete the reorganization of his armed forces. He worked at a fever pitch throughout the spring of 1941, trying desperately to improve the Soviet Union's defensive posture while seeking to delay the inevitable confrontation". (1)

Glantz' views are supported by other experienced historians like England's Antony Beevor. He observed that "the Red Army was simply not in a state to launch a major offensive in the summer of 1941"; but Beevor did not entirely exclude the possibility that Stalin "may have been considering a preventive attack in the winter of 1941, or more probably in 1942, when the Red Army would be better trained and equipped". (2)

Was the Soviet leadership aware of the threat that Hitler posed to their state?; and which was gradually developing around them like a dark cloud. Early in July 1940 a report compiled by the Soviet intelligence agency, the NKGB, was sent to the Kremlin. It revealed that the Third Reich's General Staff had requested Germany's Transport Ministry to furnish details, regarding rail capacities for Wehrmacht soldiers to be shifted from west to east (3). It constituted the first hint of what lay ahead. This was the period, in the high summer of 1940, when serious discussions started between Hitler and his generals, relating to an attack on Russia.

As early as 31 July 1940 the German planning for an invasion of the Soviet Union "was in full swing", as noted by US author Harrison E. Salisbury (4). Earlier in July Hitler had initially pondered attacking Russia in the autumn of 1940 but, by late July, he concluded it was too late in the year with poor weather fast approaching.

There is little indication that Stalin, or high-ranking Soviet officials, were at all worried by the first warning signals they received through intelligence about Nazi intentions. During early August 1940, the British obtained information suggesting Hitler was planning to destroy Russia, and London passed on their findings to Moscow (5). Stalin ignored them as he strongly distrusted the British, not without some reason. This was based in part on Stalin's recent experiences in dealing with Conservative governments who were, to put it kindly, of an unfriendly disposition towards the Soviet Union.

London and Paris refused to sign a pact with the Kremlin in the spring and summer of 1939 - which would have aligned the British, French and Russians against Nazi Germany (6). Stalin had no choice but to then finalise an agreement with Hitler that autumn, and these unwanted realities have since been suppressed by institutions like the German-led European

Union.

The Nazi-Soviet Pact of 23 August 1939 had served the Soviets well, until the Wehrmacht swiftly routed France from May to June 1940. The manner of the French defeat astonished and disturbed Stalin, who was expecting a long, drawn-out conflict in the west, as in the First World War.

Yet Stalin's agreement with Hitler had kept Russia out of the heavy fighting for now, while the Kremlin made territorial gains by taking over the eastern half of Poland, on 6 October 1939. With the end of the Winter War against Finland, the Soviets absorbed around 10% of Finnish land in March 1940. At the beginning of August 1940 Stalin officially annexed the Baltic nations of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, having first occupied those states in mid-June 1940, which resulted in pro-German officials fleeing the region (7). Stalin's march into the Baltic came as a response to the Nazi triumphs on the western front, and his understandable fear of Baltic nationalism and possible German penetration near Soviet frontiers.

Basil Liddell Hart, the retired British Army captain and military theorist wrote, "Hitler had agreed that the Baltic states should be within the Soviet Union's sphere of influence, not to their actual occupation; and he felt that he had been tricked by his partner; although most of his advisers realistically considered the Russian move into the Baltic states to be a natural precaution, inspired by fear of what Hitler might attempt after his victory in the west". (8)

During the days after the Fall of France, Stalin occupied the Romanian territories of Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia. Until World War I, Bessarabia had belonged to the Russian Empire for about a century, but Northern Bukovina never before comprised part of Russia. In the eyes of Hitler and German generals, Stalin's advance into parts of northern Romania was dangerous and provocative. Hitler first learnt of Stalin's plan to reincorporate Bessarabia on 23 June 1940, when just after sunrise the Nazi leader was victoriously touring Paris in an open topped vehicle (9). Hitler became irritated when he heard the news. He felt that Bessarabia's return to Russia would bring Stalin intolerably close to the Axis oil wells, at the city of Ploesti in southern Romania.

During a meeting with Benito Mussolini in the Bavarian Alps on 19 January 1941, Hitler told his Italian counterpart, "now in the age of airpower, the Romanian oil fields can be turned into an expanse of smoking debris by air attack from Russia and the Mediterranean, and the life of the Axis depends on these oil fields". (10)

Over the course of World War II, Ploesti's wells furnished the Nazi empire with at least 35% of its entire oil, other accounts state as much as 60%; but the latter figure is most likely excessive and above the overall average (11) (12). For many years Romania was Europe's largest oil producing country by far, and the fifth biggest on earth in 1941 and 1942, having overtaken Mexico. The significant oil sources in Indonesia (Dutch East Indies) fell under Axis control in early 1942, when that country was overrun by Japanese armies, and they would remain there for over three years.

Hitler wanted his Romanian oil fields to be formidably defended; he ordered the Wehrmacht to place scores of heavy and medium German anti-aircraft guns around the Ploesti refineries, and that smoke screens also be deployed; the latter were effective at obscuring the installations from enemy planes, which were shot down in large numbers.

The Germans created limited quantities of oil from synthetic hydrogenation processes, involving materials like coal. This mostly benefited the Luftwaffe, not so much the panzers and other ground vehicles. The terms of the non-aggression deal with Russia ensured the Reich received in total 900,000 tons of Soviet oil, from September 1939 to June 1941. This was not a huge amount, considering the Wehrmacht consumed three million tons of oil in 1940 alone. (13)

Nazi Germany was also supplied with oil by the United States, then unrivalled as the world's biggest oil producer and exporter; specifically the dealings that American corporations like Texaco and Standard Oil conducted with the Nazis, sometimes secretly through other countries, along with US-controlled subsidiaries based in the Reich (14). In addition, arriving from the globe's third largest oil manufacturing state, Venezuela, then a major US client, came shipments of petroleum sent across the Atlantic, destined for the German war machine.

Altogether "around 150 American companies" had "business links to Nazi Germany", the Israeli journalist Ofer Aderet outlined, writing for the left-leaning newspaper Haaretz. US business deals with the Nazis, Aderet wrote, "included huge loans, large investments, cartel agreements, the construction of plants in Germany as part of the Third Reich's rearmament, and the supply of massive amounts of war matériel. (15)

Meanwhile, Stalin's reintegration of Bessarabia in early July 1940 was providing a buffer to the Soviet defence of its navy, in the Black Sea slightly further east; including added security to Russian naval bases, such at the port of Odessa in southern Ukraine. The Soviet advance into Romania "was worse than 'a slap in the face' for Hitler", Liddell Hart observed as "it placed the Russians ominously close to the Romanian oil fields on which he counted for his own supply". On 29 July 1940 Hitler spoke to his Chief-of-Operations, General Alfred Jodl, about the potential of fighting Russia if Stalin attempted to seize Ploesti. (16)

On 9 August 1940 General Jodl issued a directive titled "Reconstruction East", ordering that German transport and supplies be bolstered in the east, so that plans would be cemented by the spring of 1941 for an attack on Russia (17). It was at this time that Winston Churchill's government began warning Moscow of the German invasion plans; but Stalin strongly suspected that the British wanted to drag him into the war, just to take the pressure off London. Stalin certainly believed that Soviet armies would have to fight the Germans some day, but not just yet.

Soviet designs towards Germany remained non-threatening. On 1 August 1940 the Soviet Union's foreign minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, said that the Nazi-Soviet Pact was centred not on "fortuitous considerations of a transient nature, but on the fundamental political interests of both countries" (18). Nevertheless by September 1940, Soviet commanders stationed along their western frontier began talking about Hitler's "Drang nach Osten", meaning the dictator's proposal for eastward expansion. Soviet military men spoke about Hitler's habit of carrying around a picture of Frederick Barbarossa, the red-bearded Prussian emperor who centuries before had waged war against the Slavs. (19)

On 12 November 1940 foreign minister Molotov, a staunch communist, landed in Germany by aircraft. Upon Molotov's arrival in Berlin, Stalin told him to indicate to the Germans that he wanted a wide-ranging deal with them. Stalin still thought a partnership with Hitler into the near future was attainable. Instead, during the talks Nazi officials presented to Molotov a junior partnership for Soviet Russia, in a German-dominated global alliance. Soviet policy, as

the Nazis insisted, was to be focused on south Asia, towards India, and a conflict with Britain. This did not satisfy Stalin at all.

Following Molotov's dispatching of the report on his disappointing discussions in Berlin, according to Yakov Chadaev, a Soviet administrator, Stalin was certain that Hitler intended to wage war on Russia. Less than two weeks later, on 25 November 1940 Stalin informed the Bulgarian communist politician Georgi Dimitrov "our relations with Germany are polite on the surface, but there is serious friction between us". (20)

Marshal Aleksandr Vasilevsky, a top level Russian officer who repeatedly met with Stalin, had accompanied Molotov to Berlin. Vasilevsky returned home convinced that Hitler would invade the Soviet Union (21). Vasilevsky's opinion was shared by many of his Red Army colleagues. After Molotov had left Berlin, Hitler met German executives and made it clear to them that he was going to attack Russia.

In the autumn of 1940 draft plans for the strategic positioning of Soviet divisions along their western frontier, in preparation for a German invasion, were sent to the Kremlin by the Russian High Command. Stalin did not respond. Rather ominously, in the second half of November 1940 the central European countries of Hungary, Slovakia and Romania all joined Hitler's new European order, by signing up to the Axis coalition. Hitler could now depend especially on the support of Romania, under Ion Antonescu. He was a fervently anti-communist and anti-Semitic military dictator, who at age 58 had come to power on 4 September 1940.

Romania is by no means a leading nation today, but during the war years it was indeed an important country. This was mostly due to her natural resources and to a lesser extent its strategic location, beside the Black Sea and the Ukraine.

Stalin was growing slightly concerned as 1940 reached its end. Addressing Soviet generals before Christmas, Stalin referenced passages from Hitler's book 'Mein Kampf', and he spoke of the Nazi leader's stated goal of attacking the USSR some day. Stalin said "we will try to delay the war for two years", until December 1942 or into 1943. Shortly after the Wehrmacht's crushing of the French, Molotov recalled him saying, "we would be able to confront the Germans on an equal basis only by 1943". (22)

On 18 December 1940 Hitler released his Directive No. 21 outlining, "The German armed forces must be prepared to crush Soviet Russia in a quick campaign, before the end of the war against England". On Christmas Day 1940, the Soviet military attaché in Berlin received an anonymous letter. It expounded that the Germans were preparing a military operation against Russia, for the spring of 1941. (23)

By 29 December 1940 Soviet intelligence agencies had possession of the basic facts regarding Operation Barbarossa, its design and planned start date (24). In late January 1941 the Japanese military diplomat Yamaguchi, returning to the Russian capital from Berlin, said to a member of the Soviet naval diplomatic service, "I do not exclude the possibility of conflict between Berlin and Moscow".

Yamaguchi's remark was forwarded on 30 January 1941 to Marshal Kliment Voroshilov, a prominent Soviet officer who knew Stalin personally. Even before late January 1941, the Soviet Defence Commissariat was concerned enough to draft a general directive to the Russian border commands and fleets, which for the first time would name Germany

as the probable enemy in coming war.

In early February 1941, the Soviet Naval Commissariat started receiving almost daily accounts, about the arrival of German Army specialists in Bulgarian ports; and preparations for the installment of German coastal armaments there. This information was relayed to Stalin on 7 February 1941. In fact, other senior figures such as Marshal Filipp Golikov, the chief of intelligence for the USSR's General Staff, said that all Soviet reports on German planning were forwarded to Stalin himself. (25)

As Molotov was about to make his way to Berlin the previous November, Stalin stressed to him that Bulgaria is "the most important question of the negotiations" and should be placed in the Soviet realm (26). On 1 March 1941 Bulgaria instead joined the Axis. In early February 1941, the Russian command in Leningrad reported German troop movements in Finland. This was no laughing matter as Finland shares an eastern border with Russia.

The Kremlin could not count on Finnish loyalty in the event of a German attack. Finland's Commander-in-Chief Gustaf Mannerheim, in his mid-70s and an anti-Bolshevik, had been closely acquainted with the deposed Russian Tsar Nicholas II. Mannerheim previously kept a portrait of the Tsar and said, "He was my emperor". The Finns were far from grateful when the Soviet military rolled into their country in November 1939, without a declaration of war. In February 1941 the Leningrad Command reported German conversations with Sweden, pertaining to the transit of Wehrmacht troops through Swedish land.

The Soviet political administration wanted to emphasize awareness to the Red Army, to be prepared for engagement. Stalin rejected this approach, because he was afraid it would appear to Hitler that he was gathering forces to start an offensive against Germany. Stalin warned General Georgy Zhukov that "Mobilisation means war", and he did not want to risk a conflict with Germany in 1941. (27)

On 15 February 1941, a German typist entered the Soviet consulate in Berlin. He brought with him a German-Russian phrase book, which was being published in his printing shop in extra large edition - included in it were such phrases as, "Are you a Communist?", "Hands up or I'll shoot" and "Surrender" (28). The ramifications were clear enough. Around this time, Russian State Security acquired reliable intelligence stating that the German invasion of Britain was suspended indefinitely, until Russia was defeated.

In late February and early March 1941, German reconnaissance flights were taking place over the Baltic states under Russian control. These were severe infringements into the Soviet zone. The appearance of Nazi planes became frequent over the coastal city of Libau, in western Latvia, above the Estonian capital Tallinn, and over Estonia's largest island Saaremaa.

Russian Admiral Nikolai Kuznetsov, who intensely disliked the fascist states, granted the Soviet Baltic fleet authority to open fire on German aircraft. On 17 and 18 March 1941, Luftwaffe planes were spotted over Libau and promptly shot at by Soviet personnel (29). Nazi aircraft were then sighted near the city of Odessa, on the Black Sea. Admiral Kuznetsov was summoned to the Kremlin by Stalin, where he found him with the police chief Lavrentiy Beria. Stalin reprimanded Kuznetsov for giving the order to shoot at

German planes, and he expressly forbid Soviet units to do so again.

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Notes

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