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A Wise Design

Nekrich, Aleksandr

Boston University Center for the Study of Conflict, Ideology, and Policy

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Boston University
Revisions of Soviet history are nothing new. Every Soviet leader adapted history to his own political needs. However, it is particularly difficult to rewrite history and produce a new version of events if they are still fresh in the population's memory. Consequently it is easy to understand that the Stalinist interpretation of the events of the Second World War remained unshaken for quite a long time. The first critical appraisals of the events of the 1941-45 Soviet-German War and the period immediately preceding it appeared only after the "Stalin cult" was dealt some heavy blows at two CPSU Congresses—the Twentieth in 1956 and the Twenty-second in 1961—as well as by the popular revolutions and uprisings at the same time in Eastern Europe.

There are some problems of the history of the war about which polemics continue to rage, and no doubt will rage for a long time in the future. It is the accepted view that the Soviet Union became a participant in the Second World War only from the moment of the attack on it by Nazi Germany on June 22, 1941. But this is not the case. One week before the beginning of the war, i.e. Germany's attack on Poland on September 1, 1939, on August 23 the USSR and Germany signed a non-aggression treaty in Moscow. This treaty included a secret protocol on the division of Eastern Europe into German and Soviet zones of interest. (1) The Polish state was to disappear from the map of Europe. With the safety of its rear guaranteed, Germany attacked Poland. In accordance with the agreement with Hitler, the Red Army then struck the Polish Army in the rear on September 17. Poland fell, and its territory was divided between Germany and the USSR.
The People’s Commissar of Foreign Affairs, Molotov, did not miss the opportunity of boasting to the Supreme Soviet about the success of the Soviet-German joint military action. The deputies duly applauded. Consequently, the Soviet Union entered the Second World War on September 17, 1939, and not on June 22, 1941, in accordance with the usual view. Shortly thereafter, on September 28, the Soviet Union and Germany signed in Moscow a new treaty of friendship that also dealt with borders. This treaty included a provision for joint operations against the Polish resistance movement.

The Soviet Union undertook decisive steps to create that striking conglomerate which Soviet leaders were later to call the "socialist system," and Western historians and political scientists the "Soviet empire." During the first period of the war, the Soviet Union acted on the basis of what one might term an incomplete military-political alliance with Germany. It is appropriate to call it incomplete, since no formal military alliance was concluded. However, despite this Stalin had good grounds to remind the Germans as he did in a moment of irritation that he considered relations with Germany to be based on mutual assistance.

Indeed, although the Soviet Union formally followed a policy of neutrality with regard to the belligerent countries, at the same time it supplied one of these countries, i.e. Germany, with strategic raw materials and foodstuffs, and—even more significantly—provided Nazi Germany with other services of a purely military nature, e.g. a refueling base for U-boats near Murmansk, an icebreaker to enable a German raider to break out into the Pacific via Arctic waters, and supplied the Luftwaffe with meteorological reports during the air war over Britain, as well as purchasing strategic raw materials for Germany in third countries and delivering them through Soviet territory.

At the end of this period in November 1940, after negotiations carried out by Molotov in Berlin, the Soviet government agreed in principle to Hitler’s proposal that the Soviet Union join the Triple Alliance of Germany, Italy and Japan, and thus participate in sharing out the world. However, the price demanded by Stalin for his participation in the alliance seemed to the Germans to be excessively high, and subsequently they evaded
replying to Soviet counteroffers, although Molotov repeatedly reminded them of these offers.

One of the causes of the German evasiveness lay in the fact that military planning began in July 1940 for war against the USSR. It was not that Hitler feared the Soviet Union—he considered it a colossus with feet of clay—but he believed that he would not succeed in bringing Britain to its knees as long as the Soviet Union continued to exist. During the summer and fall of 1940, Stalin tried to expand the borders of his empire as far as possible. For this reason he put heavy pressure on the Balkans, particularly on Bulgaria and Turkey, and followed an adventuristic policy in supporting Yugoslavia.

In the course of pursuing these goals, Stalin continued to count on the durability of his relations with Germany, yet at the same time he made preparations to enter the war if favorable conditions for this should arise. The historical version that after war began in Europe the aims of Soviet foreign policy were entirely defensive is baseless in view of the established facts.

While recently working in the Soviet archives in Moscow, I discovered material from the personal files of Stalin’s closest aides, Kalinin, Zhdanov, Shcherbakov, and a number of others. It is evident from this material that there was never any doubt about whether the Soviet Union should enter the war at the appropriate moment. The Soviet war aim was a reduction in the capitalist world and an expansion of the socialist zone, identified with the Soviet Union. In this regard, let me cite an extract from a speech by M.I. Kalinin, chairman of the presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet, who is usually considered by historians to be the most balanced and liberal leader of the Stalin period.

On May 20, 1941, one month before the start of the German-Soviet war, Kalinin gave a report to a closed audience of officials of the Supreme Soviet apparatus who were party members or Komsomols. Kalinin was unable to conceal his disappointment that the concept of the mutual exhaustion of the opposed capitalist blocs as the result of a European war had not worked out. After all, Soviet foreign policy had been based on
this calculation, assuming that the Soviet Union would then be able to enter the war with fresh forces and dictate its own conditions.

Communists, maintained Kalinin, had been excessively concerned about the problem of preserving peace, whereas they should be "interested above all in the question of what advantage the Communist Party can draw from events that take place only once in fifty years." He continued, "War is a very dangerous business, connected with suffering," but at such a moment, "when it is possible to expand communism," war "should not be left out of account." He was satisfied that the Soviet Union had already been successful in "expanding somewhat the zone of communism and doing it with a comparatively low expenditure of resources," and the expansion of the zone of communism must be continued.(5)

It was not Kalinin alone who held this view: It reflected the essence of Stalin's policy. It followed that in pursuing this policy the Soviet Union inevitably would come into collision with Germany once the latter had seized the western part of the European continent. However, Stalin believed that the conflict of interests could be resolved. This was the reason for his interest in Hitler's proposal of partnership in dividing up the world.

Soviet intelligence provided numerous warnings of the German attack, but they were not believed. During the 1960s, a manuscript by a Soviet intelligence officer, Col V.A. Novobranets, was circulated in the Soviet Union. I was fortunate enough to be able to read it in full at the time, and Mikhail Heller and I cite it in our book *Utopia in Power*. (6) Otherwise no one would have known about this manuscript, had not Gen. P.G. Grigorenko referred to it in his remarkable memoirs.

One of the episodes in Novobranets' manuscript relates to the interpretation by the GRU of information about the impending German attack.(7) An excerpt from Novobranets' memoirs was recently published by the Moscow journal *Znamya*. (8) Novobranets, at that time a lieutenant-colonel in charge of the GRU Information Department, discovered that the number of German divisions concentrated near the Soviet border was being
systematically reduced by Gen. F.I. Golikov, head of the GRU, in the intelligence reports sent to Stalin and a small number of other Soviet leaders.

In Novobranets' opinion, Golikov did this in order to conform to Stalin's conviction that Germany did not intend to attack the Soviet Union and that the information regarding the German concentration of forces against the Soviet Union was disinformation by the British. Thus in December 1940, Golikov "cut" the German forces ranged against the USSR by 15 divisions. Novobranets then wrote the report himself, giving the real total concentration of about 110 divisions, signed it, and personally ordered its distribution to Soviet forces. The result was Novobranets' dismissal from the GRU.

To conclude, let me quote a report by L.P. Beria, head of the NKVD, to Stalin on June 21, 1941, one day before the beginning of the war: "Lieutenant-General F.I Golikov, head of the Intelligence Directorate, where the Berzin gang was active until recently, complains of his Lieutenant-Colonel Novobranets, who also is lying about how Hitler supposedly has concentrated 170 divisions against us on our western border.... However, my people and I, Iosif Vissarionovich, firmly remember your wise design: Hitler will not attack us in 1941 !"(9)

Notes:
1 Akten zur Deutschen Auswaertigen Politik 1918-1945 (ADAP), Series D (1937-45); vol.7, doc.229, pp.206-7.
2 Izvestia, November 1, 1939.
5 Tsentral'ny Partiiny Arkhiv (TsPA), Fond 78, op. 1, no. 84, p.18.
7 P.G. Grigorenko, Memoirs(New York: W.W. Norton,1982), 116-121.
9 Znamya, 6(1990), 165