

Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia

Review Number:

93

Publish date:

Tuesday, 1 February, 2000

Author:

Gabriel Gorodetsky

Date of Publication:

1998

Publisher:

Yale University Press

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

Truman Anderson

Historians of Soviet foreign policy and the Second World War will welcome the arrival of Gabriel Gorodetsky's *Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia*, the first study of Soviet decision-making between the Nazi-Soviet pact and the outbreak of the German-Soviet war to be based upon thorough research in Soviet as well as western archives. This is often an insightful and thought-provoking book that fills an important gap in the existing literature on the origins of the terrible struggle between Hitler's Germany and the USSR.

Gorodetsky's stated aim is twofold. First, he seeks to discredit further the "preventative war" thesis popularized in works such as Victor Suvorov's *Icebreaker: Who started the Second World War?* (London, 1990). Gorodetsky has already published extensively on this question and has succeeded admirably in revealing Suvorov's case (and that of like-minded German-speaking authors) as a tissue of speculation and distortion. It therefore comes as no surprise that *Grand Delusion* further undermines the flimsy edifice of right-wing revisionist works on the roots of operation "Barbarossa". Accordingly, this review will concentrate on Gorodetsky's other objective, namely, his painstaking effort to explain Stalin's policy toward Nazi Germany in this period, a policy that culminated in the Red Army being caught unprepared by the German onslaught of 22 June 1941.

Gorodetsky sets about this task by offering a very detailed look at the actual conduct of Soviet, German, and British diplomacy between the invasion of Poland and the start of "Barbarossa". His approach is very similar to that of Donald Cameron Watt in *How War Came: The Immediate Origins of the Second World War, 1938-1939* (London, 1989), which Gorodetsky praises in his introduction. At the same time, he provides the reader with exhaustive documentation on the intelligence flowing to Stalin from myriad sources, including his foreign ministry, the NKGB and Soviet military intelligence (the GRU). Gorodetsky maintains that when we place this intelligence in its elaborate diplomatic context, Stalin's decisions - long derided by western

historians as colossal blunders - become much easier to understand. According to Gorodetsky, Stalins intelligence about Hitlers intentions and military preparations was far from unambiguous, and tended, catastrophically, to reinforce his quite rational assumptions about Germanys aims and probable course of action. Stalin belatedly recognized the scale of the German threat and took steps to prepare the Red Army for the worst. At the same time, however, he clung desperately to the hope that he could avoid war by appeasement, and this delusion hamstrung the Soviet militarys efforts to make ready for the onslaught up to the very last moment.

Gorodetskys argument largely discounts the role of ideology in shaping either Stalins or Hitlers actions, and unfolds thematically and chronologically in the following manner. Stalin, whose main concern was the security of Soviet Russia, scored a major success in the Nazi-Soviet Pact. This success was shattered, however, by Germanys unexpectedly swift victory over France, which demonstrated the superiority of the Wehrmacht. Faced with such a dramatic shift in the balance of power, Stalin reacted by occupying the Baltic states as a buffer zone, and by attempting to negotiate a new power-sharing relationship with Hitler. The Soviet leaders objectives were to keep the peace with Germany and at the same time to gain control of the Danube estuary against Russia would fall, for none of these historians questions the seriousness of Hitlers interest in the East.

Most readers who are familiar with the extensive literature on Hitlers foreign policy will find Gorodetskys case less than convincing. It is hamstrung by his failure to take the pre-war history of Nazi Germany into account, especially Hitlers relationship with the armed forces and his decision for war in 1939. Gorodetsky simply does not deal with German motives for the Nazi-Soviet pact, or with Hitlers explanations of the pact at the time:

Alles was ich unternehme, ist gegen Rußland gerichtet; wenn der Westen zu dumm und blind ist, um dies zu begreifen, werde ich gezwungen sein, mich mit den Russen zu verständigen, den Westen zu schlagen, und dann nach seiner Niederlage mich mit meinem versammelten Kräften gegen die Sowjetunion zu wenden.

(Everything I undertake is directed against Russia; if the West is too stupid and blind to grasp this, then I will be forced to come to an understanding with the Russians, strike the West, and then after its defeat turn with my assembled forces against the Soviet Union.)

Hitler never considered the Nazi-Soviet pact to be anything but a "marriage of convenience" (*Vernunftehe*), and the step-by-step appearance of the Barbarossa decision should not be interpreted simply in the light of immediate diplomatic circumstances. There is no scope in this review for a detailed comparison of multiple studies, but Jürgen Försters balanced account, which takes the entire sweep of Hitlers foreign policy into consideration, answers Gorodetskys objections to "ideological" interpretations perfectly well. This is perhaps particularly true of Gorodetskys claims regarding the primacy of the Balkans in Hitlers thinking.

Happily, Gorodetskys treatment of Hitlers decision does not prejudice the balance of Grand Delusion, which offers a very valuable discussion of the final weeks before the outbreak of war. Gorodetsky has left no stone unturned in his quest to understand the information flowing to Stalin, and his blending of dozens of sources into a smooth and convincing narrative is very deft indeed. Using documents in many cases brought to light for the first time from a plethora of archives (Russian, Yugoslav, Bulgarian, British, Swedish, French and American) Gorodetsky demonstrates the often equivocal character of the reports that came to Stalin from his best informed sources, including Maisky, Golikov (head of the GRU), Dekanozov (the Soviet ambassador in Berlin) and Beria himself. Often, these reports contained highly accurate raw intelligence about the nature of German deployments, together with soothing predictions about German intentions. Beria, for example, gave Stalin a very detailed description of German deployments on 2 June 1941 which nevertheless concluded:

With the capture of Crete the next stage of the Anglo-German war will come to an end. If Germany really wants to start a war against the Soviet Union, then it will probably be the result of an Anglo-German agreement which will lead to an immediate cessation of hostilities between Germany and England (pp. 275-76).

Gorodetsky also illustrates how German disinformation (which flowed from the highest levels of the Reich government) dovetailed with the misleading anti-war machinations of the German ambassador, von der Schulenburg. Gorodetsky's discussion of Soviet-British diplomacy is particularly good, and shows emphatically how mutual suspicion fed Stalin's misperceptions of British maneuvers, even when Churchill was intent upon helping him. Gorodetsky reminds us that there was in fact a consistent element of deception in British approaches to Stalin, the best example of which was the attempt to accentuate Soviet fears of a peace between Germany and Britain in the wake of Hess flight.

None of this to say the Gorodetsky excuses Stalin for clinging to his delusions even after the German attack had begun, or for creating the general climate of terrified toadyism that led to such a profound distortion of his intelligence in the first place. The last two chapters of the book are largely devoted to demonstrating how Stalin confounded Timoshenko and Zhukov in their attempts fully to mobilize and deploy the Red Army to meet the coming blow. Gorodetsky levels the blame for Soviet unpreparedness squarely where it belongs with Stalin. Nevertheless, the book ends on an oddly equivocal and somewhat contradictory note, for Gorodetsky finishes by asserting that there was ultimately little that Stalin could have done to improve the overall strategic position of the USSR:

Stalin's failure to prepare for the German onslaught primarily reflected the unappealing political choices which the Soviet Union faced before the outbreak of the Second World War, and even more so on the eve of the Great Patriotic War. It was however aggravated by Stalin's self-deception and miscalculation, a reflection of his authoritarian rule. And yet, even with hindsight, it is hard to devise alternatives which Stalin could have safely pursued. If he had made a pre-emptive strike, the blow would at best have been softened but definitely not averted.

If nothing else, this statement seems to contradict his very strong statements about the (false) inevitability of Hitler's decision to turn east. It is also worth remembering (as Gorodetsky himself points out) that one of the crucial stumbling blocs to better Soviet-British relations prior to Barbarossa was Molotov's demand that Britain recognize the annexation of the Baltic states. Stalin's problems with Britain were, to an extent, of his own making, and he had greater flexibility than Gorodetsky's closing remarks would seem to imply.

There are minor stylistic and editing problems in *Grand Delusion*. Gorodetsky's diction is not always clear, but most of these shortcomings reflect badly on the Yale University Press rather than the author. There is consistent trouble with German names ("Jödl" instead of "Jodl", "von Schulenburg" instead of "von der Schulenburg", "Ueberschör" for "Ueberschär", "von Paulus" instead of "Paulus"). There is also an inconvenient inconsistency in the citation of sources, in that some works cited in the notes do not appear in the bibliography.

On balance, *Grand Delusion* is a valuable work. Greater attention to the background development of foreign policy, particularly with respect to Germany, would have strengthened the book, but Gorodetsky's ambitious reach has not exceeded his grasp. His contribution to the "preventative war" debate, though not discussed in this review, is commendable, but more important, Gorodetsky has offered a detailed and revealing look at Soviet decision-making on the eve of operation "Barbarossa".

Due to outstanding work commitments the author has not yet been able to respond to this review

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/93>

Links:

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/649>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>