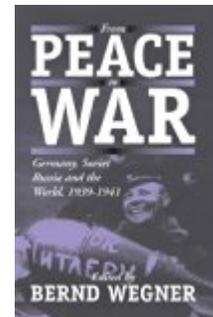




Bernd Wegner, ed.. *From Peace to War: Germany, Soviet Russia and the World, 1939-1941*. Providence and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1997. viii + 632 pp. \$75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-57181-882-9.



Reviewed by Ruud van Dijk

Published on H-German (February, 1998)

German-Russian relations have long been a high-stakes encounter between two restless European great powers, encompassing both close friendship and cooperation and the most vicious kinds of warfare. While the realities of geographical proximity and each side's troubled modern national experience always provided the potential for violent conflict, there have also been periods during which Moscow and Berlin were able to reconcile their differences, frequently at the expense of others.

The 1939-1941 period contains most if not all of these elements of modern German-Russian relations. However, what makes these years endlessly fascinating is their singularity. More than any other period of German-Russian turbulence, this one is characterized by an exorbitant level of suspicion, deceit, hostility, and cruelty. In addition, developments often occurred at a feverishly fast pace. Although Moscow and Berlin also cooperated during these years, and even though historians should guard against reading history backwards, what ultimately sets this period apart from any other era in German-Russian relations is its

climax: Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 and all the horrendous events that followed from it.

Although the collection under review does not explicitly deal with the question, it is worth asking whether, in light of the way ideological differences and geopolitical contests had been developing in Central and Eastern Europe during the 20th century, the catastrophe of 1941 was inevitable. And if it was not, how and at what point could it have been staved off? Was there anything Stalin could have done to convince Hitler that Germany had more to gain from peace than war? Were there missed opportunities when Moscow and the Western powers pursued (halfheartedly) "collective security" prior to 1939? What if Hitler had failed to seize power in Germany in 1933? Should we go back to the Bolshevik coup d'etat or Stalin's rise to the top in the Kremlin? But what about German war aims in the East during World War I? Although nothing is inevitable until it happens, it appears that the more time passed after World War I and the Russian Revolution, but particularly after 1933, the harder it was for all the

major parties involved to go down alternative roads, especially because to the participants these alternatives often seemed to contradict vital interests or cherished objectives.

Indirectly, *From Peace to War* does deal with these questions, for in its various sections contributors delve deeply into, for example, German *Ostpolitik* after 1918 (Gottfried Schramm), the origins of the Hitler-Stalin pact (Ingeborg Fleischhauer), Germany's military policy after 1939 (Juergen Forster, Bernhard Kroener, Andreas Hillgruber), and Stalin's view of his relationship with Hitler and Soviet military policy after 1939 (Gabriel Gorodetsky, Joachim Hoffmann, Yuri Kirshin, Bernd Bonwetsch). This way the reader can make up his or her own mind. Indeed, probably the greatest merit of this collection of essays is that with its help the reader can get acquainted with a great many major themes of this episode in German-Russian relations and, moreover, often see them addressed from different viewpoints and with different or complementary conclusions.

This is also the stated objective of the editors: to provide a summary of the state of research on the topic(s), including the scholarly controversies and going beyond traditional themes of diplomacy and war. The book is part of an ongoing series of publications--of both sources and scholarship--on the history of World War II sponsored by the German *Militaergeschichtliches Forschungsamt*. Without being comprehensive, or laying any claims to this, the book covers a wide variety of topics. It is divided into five sections:

1. The Period of Soviet-German Partnership (with essays on the fate of Poland and the Poles under the Nazi-Soviet pact, consequences for the Baltics and Finland, and economic relations);

2. Operation "Barbarossa:" Political Preconditions, Strategic Planning, and Military Consequences (all from the German perspective);

3. Politics and Experience of the War of Annihilation (with essays approaching the issue from "above" as well as from "below");

4. Soviet Politics and War Strategy, 1941;

5. Germany and the Soviet Union in International Politics (primarily concerned with the experience of third countries, ranging from Italy and Turkey to Switzerland and the United States).

On the whole, the thirty-five essays succeed extremely well in meeting the editors' objectives. Not only does the reader get the promised overview of research and scholarly debates, thanks to the international cast of contributors (nine different countries are represented here)--the book also touches on a lot of international scholarship that because of its vast scope and linguistic diversity would be impossible to master for any single individual. This international cast of contributors also presents a minor problem in that some of the essays do not appear in the most readable English. This is not the fault of the authors, and it is unquestionable that the benefits of the growing international scholarly cooperation in the field of twentieth century international history (of which this book is a fine example) vastly outweigh such relatively small discomforts, but one wonders at the same time whether an English-language publisher could not do more to ensure accessibility to what is often quite valuable work.

Perhaps a greater weakness is the fact that this collection of essays appeared originally in 1991 (for the German original see *Zwei Wege nach Moskau, vom Hitler-Stalin Pakt bis zum "Unternehmen Barbarossa"*) so that the state of the field presented here is that of the late 1980s. Although in his preface to this edition the sponsor may be largely correct when he says that "our knowledge of the field has seen little basic change since then," (vii) the fact remains that at the time these essays were written, archives all over Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union began opening their doors to researchers. And a sizable amount of the new sources has in recent years be-

gun to appear in journals and in some cases in monographs as well. In this edition only one essay (that of the prolific Bernd Bonwetsch on "The Purge of the Military and the Red Army's Operational Capability during the 'Great Patriotic War'") has been updated with the help of new Russian information.

On the other hand, one of the things we have learned about the "new" evidence that has become available in recent years is that using it without some solid knowledge of existing primary and secondary materials often does more harm than good. In order to begin acquiring some fundamental knowledge of the German-Russian relationship between 1939 and 1941--broadly understood--*From Peace to War* is one of the better places to start.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Ruud van Dijk. Review of Wegner, Bernd, ed. *From Peace to War: Germany, Soviet Russia and the World, 1939-1941*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. February, 1998.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1700>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.