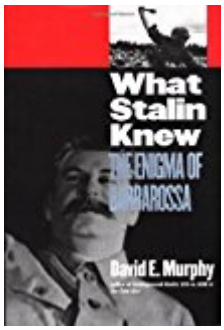
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**David E. Murphy.** *What Stalin Knew: The Enigma of Barbarossa.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005. 352 pp $30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-10780-7.




**Reviewed by** Roger Chapman

**Published on** H-Russia (November, 2008)

**Commissioned by** Nellie H. Ohr

*What Stalin Knew* offers a systematic account of the warnings and evidence provided to Josef V. Stalin and his closest subordinates about the pending invasion of the Soviet Union by Nazi Germany, what came to be known as Operation Barbarossa. Although this work does not offer any significantly new information, the story is laid out and thoroughly explained. Author David E. Murphy, a retired CIA official who worked in Berlin during the Cold War, utilizes his practical understanding of intelligence gathering to analyze and interpret the known record pertaining to Stalin's handling of intelligence reports in the months preceding the attack.

At three in the morning on June 22, 1941, German military forces launched a preemptive attack against the Soviet Union, which experts suggest "was based largely on ideological rather than sound strategic reasoning."[1] Meticulously planned, the Nazi offensive involved three army groups comprised of 154 divisions--a force of 3.6 million men, some 3,000 tanks, and 2,700 aircraft. The overall objective of the invasion was the capture of Leningrad, Moscow, and Ukraine, including major Soviet industries, as well as its oil, coal, and agricultural centers. Adolf Hitler, who declared that when it comes to the Soviet Union "'you have only to kick in the door and the whole rotten structure will come crashing down,'" sought to defeat the Red Army very swiftly in a campaign he optimistically predicted would last six weeks or less and would force Stalin to agree to Nazi concessions.[2] Historians continue to debate whether this audacious attack was rational, given Napoleon Bonaparte 's experience with Russia's bitter winters and stalwart soldiers in 1812.

If doubts linger about the rationality of Hitler, there is far greater mystery about Stalin and what he was thinking in the months prior to the Nazi invasion. Considering the massive scale of Operation Barbarossa, it should not have been a surprise for the Red Army. By all indications, however, the offensive found Soviet forces completely unprepared, as if the attack was the last thing

they had expected. For several days after the invasion, Stalin reportedly hid in his dacha, profoundly depressed, perhaps fearful of being overthrown, and, from June 23 to 30, he apparently issued not one order nor signed a single document. [3] We have to wonder: What was Stalin thinking? And, what was he thinking during those many months the Nazi forces were amassing at his western border?

Murphy, in somewhat monotonous detail, argues that in the months preceding Operation Barbarossa, Stalin failed to take advantage of the intelligence data obtained by his operatives. The heart of *What Stalin Knew* is the cataloguing of known reports, including intelligence reports from Soviet agents in Western Europe, Eastern Europe, and Japan; reports from foreign sources in the key cities of Berlin, London, Helsinki, and Warsaw; intelligence gathering from the foreign diplomatic community in Moscow; and reports from the various headquarters of the Soviet border troops that detailed the German military buildup along the Soviet western border. All of this supports Murphy's argument that Stalin willfully ignored information that did not match his preconceived notions.

One intriguing account is of the Soviet espionage operation in Moscow, which involved tunneling into the detached residence of the German military attaché in late April 1941. This covert exploit enabled Soviet operatives to photograph documents kept in a German safe and to plant microphones. Two days prior to the invasion, the German ambassador, Count Friedrich Werner von der Schulenburg, was at that residence and he was recorded confiding to a colleague, "'I am in a very pessimistic mood, and while I know nothing concrete, I think Hitler will start a war with Russia. I saw him privately in April and said completely openly that his plans for war with the USSR were sheer folly.'" He poignantly, added, "'Believe me, because of this frankness, I have fallen into disgrace. I am risking my career and perhaps I'll soon be in a concentration camp'" (p. 112). Of course, the key phrase in von der Schulenburg's statement is "I know nothing concrete." (After the invasion of the Soviet Union, the ambassador was briefly interned by his superiors and then transferred to an unimportant post. Part of the conspiracy to kill Hitler in 1944, von der Schulenburg was arrested, founded guilty of treason, and executed by hanging.)

But, from Murphy's perspective, the information gathered in Berlin alone (not to mention what was heard in Moscow) presented a clear enough picture of what was ahead: "Taken together ... the information from these sources should have left no question in Stalin's mind that the German Reich and its formidable war machine were preparing for a massive invasion of the USSR" (p. 101). Murphy's interpretation echoes that offered in an earlier published work by Gabriel Gorodetsky: "The raw data, especially when examined in retrospect, seem to have comprised a steady stream of accurate and detailed information on the German build-up. However, the attempts to accommodate the intelligence with the prevailing political concepts obscured the meaning of the facts."[4]

Murphy shows that Stalin was forewarned, months in advance and right up to the final hours in which the attack was to begin. So, how could Stalin have been so duped? According to Murphy, Stalin's underlings were very cautious in what reports they presented to their boss and how those reports were worded. For example, it was not uncommon for his top officials to pass on intelligence reports with comments in the margins matching what they anticipated would be Stalin's interpretation. They typically dismissed credible reports of Hitler's preparations as "disinformation," which apparently served to reinforce Stalin's views. The underlings did this to avoid crossing Stalin, a form of self-protection since the purges were a fresh memory (it is estimated that prior to the outbreak of hostilities with Nazi Ger-

many some thirty-five thousand Red Army officers had been killed by Stalin). In other words, this interpretation contends that Kremlin groupthink played a major role in Hitler's ability to catch the Red Army off guard. This fear inside the totalitarian system, even by its ranking leaders, harmonizes with the observation of the poet Joseph Brodsky, who later wrote of how the Red Army was capable of "marching triumphant through foreign cities," yet the same warriors "trembled in terror when they came home" after winning the war.[5]

Murphy also argues that Stalin was convinced that the capitalist countries of Great Britain, France, and Germany would fight each other to exhaustion, and then the Soviet Union would be able to arrive on the scene and Sovietize portions of Western Europe. Stalin's assumption was based on Marxist-Leninist ideological thinking, which convinced the Soviet ruler that he could sit on the sidelines while Germany and Britain fought a death battle. Here, Murphy relies on a text allegedly quoting from a speech Stalin gave at a Politburo meeting on August 19, 1939, which was attended by Comintern members. The document he quotes is a Russian translation of a French dictation that was released by a Russian archive in 1994. Whether this document is genuine and whether such a speech took place at all is a matter of dispute. Murphy acknowledges this debate but nonetheless confidently asserts that the alleged speech does reflect Stalin's "innermost thoughts" at the time (p. 24).

Stalin, Murphy continues, knew very well that there was a heavy German military buildup on his western border, but he deluded himself into believing that Hitler was trying to trick London into complacency. Hitler, in fact, reportedly offered that explanation. The appendix section of ***What Stalin Knew*** contains a letter dated May 14, 1941, purportedly written by Hitler and sent to Stalin, stating, "In order to organize troops for the invasion [of Great Britain] away from the eyes of the English opponent ... a large number of my troops, about eighty divisions, are located on the borders of the Soviet Union. This possibly gave rise to the rumors now circulating of a likely military conflict between us." The Nazi leader went on to pledge his "honor as chief of state" that Germany had no hostile intentions toward the Soviet Union; however, he expressed concern that one of his wayward generals might deliberately start a conflict (p. 258). He urged Stalin to show restraint should that happen and not allow it to escalate into a war that neither side wants. Any reply that was offered by Stalin has so far not been made public. Murphy writes, "By confiding in Stalin that some of his generals might launch an unauthorized provocative attack and asking Stalin not to respond in kind, Hitler virtually dictated the scenario Stalin followed in the first hours of the invasion" (p. 189). Again, we would need confirmation that this Hitler letter (and another one along the same lines) is authentic, a matter Murphy concedes.

According to Murphy, Stalin accepted Hitler's explanation and feared that a provocation could lead to war. Thus, he ordered his military not to respond to any aggressive move by the Germans. Consequently, in the months leading up to the invasion, German aircraft flew over Soviet territory with impunity, enabling them to conduct intensive reconnaissance for plotting targets in advance of hostilities. Also, Stalin refused to deploy his military along the border to prepare for a possible attack, believing that would be interpreted by the Germans as a provocation. Murphy shows that he is familiar with the argument, known as the "Icebreaker" thesis, that Stalin was actually planning to launch a preemptive attack against Germany; according to this scenario, Hitler had to beat him to the punch by invading the Soviet Union.[6] After acknowledging this interpretation, Murphy joins most mainstream historians in dismissing that viewpoint, arguing that it has been advanced by those who wish to exonerate Stalin.

However, since Murphy's aim is to show that Stalin was an irrational player, any serious consideration of the view that the Soviet leader was planning a preemptive attack could possibly weaken this book's thesis.

The author relies primarily on three published collections of Soviet archival papers: ***1941 god*** (***The Year 1941***), a two-volume set, compiled and edited by Aleksandr N. Yakovlev, and published in 1998; ***Organy Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti SSSR v Velikoy Otechestvennoy Voine*** (***Organs of State Security of the USSR in the Great Fatherland War***), also two volumes, as published in 1995 by the Federal Service of Counterintelligence (later renamed the Federal Security Service); and ***Sekrety Gitlera Na Stole U Stalina*** (***Hitler's Secrets on Stalin's Desk***), which was published in 1995 by the Federal Service of Counterintelligence and the Federal Intelligence Service (SVR). Some of the same documents appear in all three collections.

Murphy's only actual visit to an archive was to the Russian State Military Archive (RGVA), where he obtained information on Ivan Proskurov, the chief of military intelligence. (Chapters 3, 5, 14, and 19 detail Proskurov's tragic demise.) The author submitted some questions to the Central Archive of the SVR, but they went unanswered, and he was not even allowed access to the actual documents that had been published in ***1941 god***. Murphy believes those documents have been reclassified. He also writes, "It was evident that this lack of access reflected deliberate policy decisions by the present Russian leadership to ensure that these services, and these services alone, would be able to use their archival material in interpreting the past" (p. xiv). All of this suggests that the news release by the Yale University Press, stating that ***What Stalin Knew*** is based on "vast research in the Stalin Archive in Moscow," is a distortion of fact. Any discerning reader will wonder what documents were purposely left out of those three collections of papers published under the watchful eye of the Russian government and to what extent ***What Stalin Knew*** reports what Stalin knew.

Murphy loses credibility with this reader for too mildly assessing more current events. In referring to intelligence failures surrounding the surprise attacks of September 11 and the absence of stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq following the American preemptive invasion, Murphy writes, "Closer to hand are the failures of the Bush administration in America with respect to Iraq. While the intelligence community produced intelligence on weapons of mass destruction that turned out to be wrong, previous administrations apparently ignored a variety of indicators of al-Q'aida's intention to conduct a major attack on U.S. domestic targets" (p. xix).[7] Here, Murphy shows that he does not evaluate all things equally--he is much harder on Stalin than he is on Bush. In the case of ignored information about the pending Hitler invasion, Stalin the individual is blamed and less so the intelligence bureaucracy (Murphy's book, after all, is based on Soviet intelligence reports Stalin ignored). In the case of ignored information about the pending terrorist attacks of September 11, the intelligence bureaucracy is blamed and less so Bush. Murphy suggests that Stalin's intelligence community had the correct information, but he suggests that Bush's intelligence community passed on incorrect information. The reader might go much farther in finding similarities between Stalin's approach to using intelligence information and that of the Bush administration, especially when reading Murphy's revelations about Soviet lackeys who were reluctant to pass on reports that contradicted Stalin's preconceived notions.

The Soviet foreign intelligence agents, Murphy explains, "always relied on the dissemination of reports directly to specific customers" in the Soviet governmental hierarchy, "leaving them to decide on interpretation," adding that "Stalin insisted on this procedure and made clear that he alone would judge individual [intelligence] reports and

their implications" (p. 95). This seems to be how Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney utilized intelligence information while rationalizing a preemptive attack on Iraq.[8] Indeed, what Murphy editorializes about Stalin could be applied to Bush: "His problem was his limited ability to understand things foreign" (p. 95). Of course, as Stalin had accomplices, so did Bush. Although Murphy asserts that by spring 1941 certain Soviet intelligence offices concerned with Germany began providing some analysis with the raw intelligence they forwarded to superiors, people in both Russia and the United States know that leaders who have their minds already made up are not likely to be swayed by contradictory evidence. We will have to wait and see if a retired Russian intelligence officer will have any interest in writing *What Bush Knew*.

Murphy can be accused of excessive speculation throughout his work. Analysis is suspect if it is largely held together by qualifiers such as: "this report must have been rejected by the boss [Stalin]," "such minutia was probably typical of the reports ... sent to their case officers," an official "would surely have learned" and he was "probably also shown two reports," "it seems likely that ... [an] arrest was related to," and "so it must have been suppressed," etc. (pp. 102, 115, 192, 205, 201, 208).

The photographs in Murphy's book are of poor quality. Several are quite blurry. To make matters worse, production costs were reduced by not printing them on glossy paper. Some of the images appear as if they had been scanned and then reproduced using an inkjet printer. As for the maps, they are of good quality, but some should have had more detail. While Murphy offers an analysis about Stalin's prewar thinking from the perspective of a trained intelligence officer, it is doubtful that it is the last word on the matter.

Notes

[1]. *Encyclopedia of World War II: A Political, Social, and Military History*, s.v. "Barbarossa, operation."

[2]. Alan Clark, *Barbarossa: The Russian-German Conflict, 1941-45* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1965), 43.

[3]. Alan Bullock, *Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 729.

[4]. Gabriel Gorodetsky, *Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 54.

[5]. Joseph Brodsky, "On the Death of Zhukov," in *A Part of Speech* (Oxford and Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1980), 78. This document was originally published in 1974.

[6]. See Constantine Pleshakov, *Stalin's Folly: The Tragic First Ten Days of World War II on the Eastern Front* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), 75-94.

[7]. Murphy's reference to "previous administrations" brushes aside the famously specific warning that was provided to the Bush administration. As James Ridgeway writes: "Not only was the Intelligence Community fully aware of the growing danger of an attack [by Al Qaeda], it also had indications such attacks might well involve planes as weapons." James Ridgeway, *The 5 Unanswered Questions about 9/11: What the 9/11 Commission Report Failed to Tell Us* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005), 101. This information was directly communicated to President George W. Bush in the Presidential Daily Briefing of August 6, 2001.

[8]. See David Barstow, William J. Broad, and Jeff Gerth, "How the White House Embraced Disputed Arms Intelligence," *New York Times*, October 3, 2004, http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/03/international/middleeast/03tube.html?_r=1&oref=slogin; Seymour M. Hersh, "Annals of National Security: The Stovepipe," *New Yorker*,

October 27, 2003, http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2003/10/27/031027fa_fact; and Jane Mayer, "The Manipulator," *New Yorker*, June 7, 2004, http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/06/07/040607fa_fact1.

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

**Citation:** Roger Chapman. Review of Murphy, David E. *What Stalin Knew: The Enigma of Barbarossa.* H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. November, 2008.

**URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23366