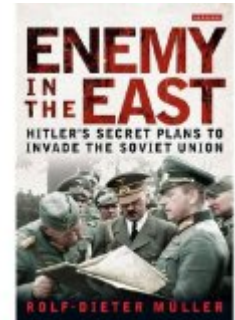


Rolf-Dieter Müller. *Enemy in the East: Hitler's Secret Plans to Invade the Soviet Union.* London: I. B. Tauris, 2015. Illustrations, maps. 316 pp. \$29.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-78076-829-8.



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Rolf-Dieter Müller's *Enemy in the East* is focused on identifying the factors that influenced the German decision to invade Russia in June 1941. Müller argues that unlike the conventional understanding, this decision was not made in the immediate aftermath of the German victory in the West and that its ownership was as much the leadership of the Wehrmacht as it was Adolf Hitler's. It was also not clear at the outset that this would become a "war of annihilation." Müller explains at the beginning of the book that, as he sees it, the manner in which this fateful choice was made was not in accordance with a "step-by-step" plan on Hitler's part—as has been advocated by earlier generations of historians—but rather was governed by a set of circumstances that only fell into place in the months prior to September 1939 and June 1941. This book is organized into five chapters, the first four of similar length, while the fifth and final one, which covers the period of the Hitler-Stalin Pact to Operation Barbarossa, is over one hundred pages long. There are useful illustrations and maps throughout the text.

Müller's assessment begins by looking at the origins of German thinking about Russia. In describing the aftermath of World War I, the recreation of Poland and the disastrous Red Army campaigns there in 1920, and the successes of the Poles in their battles against the inexperienced Red Army, Müller illustrates how the strategic emphasis on Russia had been part of the Reichswehr's thinking well before the Nazi rise to power. Once Hitler came to power, Müller explains, Germans attempted to woo Poland into joining them in an anti-Communist crusade. Müller argues that up until 1939 Poland was still being courted as a potential partner by Germany in a war against their shared enemy in Communist Russia. Polish assistance in an invasion of Russia had huge potential benefits for the Nazis. Foremost among these was to prevent conflict with the Western Allies and thereby creating the conditions for Hitler's long-desired "free hand in the East."

Enemy in the East demonstrates that German/Polish relations for a time appeared very close,

but whether the Polish government was taking seriously the idea of a military campaign with the Germans is another thing. It seems that at least initially the prewar leaders of Poland had a lot in common with the Nazis. They were both extremely anti-Communist and anti-Semitic and had expansionist agendas that looked very firmly to the East. Their shared values and promises of possible cooperation in the future were articulated in the Polish-German Non-Aggression Pact of March 1934. Müller illustrates the picture of the Nazi government trying to cement friendly relations with Poland. This involved visits or exchanges with Polish leaders by highly placed Nazis, such as Heinrich Himmler, Hermann Göring, and Josef Goebbels. Eventually, the hopes of German-Polish cooperation were dashed in March 1939 with the simultaneous rejection of the German proposals by the Polish government and the announcement by the British prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, of his country's guarantee of Polish sovereignty. This decision forced Hitler's hand and he sought the most unlikely of alliances with his archenemy Joseph Stalin and the Soviet Union.

However, even after the defeat of Poland at the end of September 1939, Müller suggests, the significant anti-Soviet elements within Poland might have been used in a military capacity by the Germans. He offers little concrete evidence for this besides the fact that the Wehrmacht's campaign in Poland had been conducted, as he argues, within the rules of war, although he does acknowledge that elements within the Wehrmacht had been responsible for the "brutal mistreatment of civilians" (p. 174). He places great emphasis on the laying of a wreath and the placement of a guard over the grave of the former German ally from World War I and Polish hero Marshal Józef Piłsudski. However, Müller acknowledges that after Poland's defeat, the suggestion that Polish soldiers would be willing to fight for the Germans—in a situation reminiscent of 1914-18—against Russia these days would seem highly "unrealistic" (p. 163). I would tend to agree with him. The up-

shot of this is the firm impression that Nazi strategy was far more flexible toward possibly allying with Poland for a mutual attack on Russia. It is evident that the anti-Semitism of the Polish leadership in the 1930s was a viable conduit for possible friendship. He quotes Polish Ambassador Józef Lipski who said that Hitler would be given "a nice monument in Warsaw" if he could find a solution to the Jewish "problem" (p. 101). However, how realistically did Poland consider allying with the Germans is unknown; surely Poles were wise enough to see that their country becoming what is described rather unfalteringly in the book as an "anti-Russian trench" would not have had much long-term value for them.

After the "unexpected" declaration of war by Britain and France (and to a lesser extent the stiffer-than-expected Polish resistance), Müller surmises, Hitler was "forced" into becoming "closer to Stalin than he was happy with" (p. 160). His strategic options were narrowed by the West's rejection, despite the Russian advance into Poland, to declare war on the Soviet Union. Another key distinction Müller makes is that when war with Russia came under consideration by Hitler, racial concerns only took a backseat in his thinking, and for that matter, in the decision making of the High Command of the Wehrmacht as well. In a number of examples that describe this decision-making process, Müller barely talks about (or does not believe) the motivation for Hitler's actions as being racially driven. He argues that in his negotiations with the Russians in August 1939, Hitler "gave up" any claim to the Jews under Soviet occupation, because, as he suggests, Hitler had settled on the idea of forced emigration or deportation, which Müller identifies as the "Madagascar Plan" (p. 142).

It is the events after the defeat of Poland, leading to the Nazi decision to invade Russia that is the core of this book. Hitler had the option of continuing the offensive against the British or attacking his current ally in Russia. Müller argues

that between October 1939 and May 1941, Colonel-General Franz Halder, chief of the Oberkommando des Heeres General Staff, carries much of the blame for the misinformation that was put before Hitler in his resolution to attack Russia. Müller suggests that the reasoning behind this decision was more about cutting off British options for future possible cooperation with the USSR rather than any ideologically driven desire for a final reckoning with Hitler's political enemies. This leads Müller to contend that Hitler's "decision" to go to war with Russia at a meeting at his headquarters on July 31, 1940, was not an "undesirable, misunderstood project" presented to the army leaders, but rather an initiative that the army leaders helped to make (p. 224). From this point on, he suggests that, in general, German planning for the invasion of Russia was dominated by ignorance and underestimation. Primarily among these was the almost incomprehensible scaling back of the army's armaments production in favor of its navy and air force. German intelligence wholly underestimated the number of troops the Russians could muster and labored under the illusion that they would be able to essentially destroy these forces close to the border. They also fatally undervalued the strength of the Soviet industrial base. Further, the Germans ignored their strategic options, notably, the chance of simultaneous Japanese offensive in the East and of the limitations of Finnish assistance in the North. Lastly, the plan itself was flawed; too much was held in reserve while the Army Group Centre was too powerful a force. The drive on Moscow was impractical and simply foolish, as it would not ensure victory.

Müller suggests that, at least in the initial planning phase, there was no indication given by Hitler that the war in Russia would be fought, as he describes it, with an "abnormal character," as a racial war (p. 225). Evidence that this was what the army leadership believed would be the case were the references in war-planning documents of the potential use of collaborators among the

Russian people. Contentiously, this to some extent makes it appear that the Wehrmacht leadership did not, at least initially, share Hitler's racial beliefs. According to Müller, the army was happy to wash its hands of the administrative responsibility in these occupied zones and in that sense is no less culpable of the crimes that were committed. He rightly states that "the army's leaders took responsibility for criminal orders whose consequences not only contributed to the failure of the campaign but also [led to] the ignominious downfall of the Wehrmacht" (p. 244).

For all the many strengths of this book, a few minor errors are apparent. Müller asserts that it was in "March 1935, he [Hitler] had become supreme commander" (p. 58), but this did not happen until February 1938, after the Blomberg-Fritsch affair. A "cardinal sin" of sorts, he states that Operation Barbarossa was launched on July 22, 1941 (p. 119), which misses the actual start date by a month. A lesser crime is his claim that part of the Wehrmacht's preparation for the invasion of Poland was the "tried and tested deployment of the fifth column, which was already staging various incidents along the border" (p. 143). Tried and tested? Where? The fifth column was a fictitious invention of the Spanish Civil War; is he suggesting that the Nazis had operated a fifth column there? Müller claims that Hitler lost a potential advantage when Germans were resettled from parts of Poland under Soviet domination and thereby lost a "potential fifth column" (p. 171). In 1956, Louis de Jong proved conclusively that the German fifth column did not exist.^[1] The mention of these here is I suppose a means of enforcing that the Nazis did lose an advantage in their "race war" by neglecting various nationalist groups that may have been prepared to collaborate with them against the Soviets. However, the main evidence for this would be the fact that the German fifth column simply did not exist at all.

Overall, Müller's book reminds us of the complexity and also the players involved in the deci-

sion that led to the Nazi invasion of Russia. He proves that Hitler made his choices with the full acquiescence of his military leadership. Before the war, the possibility of an alliance with Poland was appealing to the Nazis as it would have reduced the risk of the involvement of Britain and France. In the end, this alliance was not forthcoming as the Poles were wise enough to see that their future would have involved them becoming a vassal in the German Empire (assuming the Germans were successful). This failure of an alliance with Poland was a portent for the future; as during their invasion of Russia, the Germans showed little initial inclination to ally themselves with the former subjugated peoples of the USSR. Müller has assembled some interesting observations about the conditions with which the Germans launched Operation Barbarossa; it is startling to read the lack of knowledge, inept planning, and the sweeping assumptions that were made about the apparent weaknesses of the Russians (the “colossus with feet of clay” is repeated several times). His critical reassessments of the various decisions the Nazis took reveal that the army’s leadership carried as much responsibility as Hitler for the disasters that lay ahead in Russia.

Note

[1]. Louis de Jong, *The German Fifth Column in the Second World War* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956), 186.

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