

**Gabriel Gorodetsky.** *Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999. xvi + 408 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-07792-6.



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Icebreaker or Titanic? Stalin's Foreign Policy, 1939-1941

In the summer of 1995, while doing research in Moscow, I lived with an elderly Russian *intelligent* couple. Aleksandr Mikhailovich, an aviation engineer, was widely read in Russian literature and history, and seemed quite interested in my own research on the Soviet Union in World War II. In the midst of one of our many conversations, he surprised me with the assertion that Stalin was, of course, responsible for the rise of Adolf Hitler, and in addition, that Hitler attacked the Soviet Union to prevent a Soviet offensive against Germany. When pressed for evidence he pointed to Viktor Suvorov's book *Ledokol'* (*Icebreaker*), which claimed that Stalin was planning on attacking Hitler but that the Nazi leader surprised him with a pre-emptive strike.

The arguments forwarded by *Icebreaker*, whose author is a defector from Soviet military intelligence, have gained quite a following in the former Soviet Union among ordinary citizens and historians alike.[1] Indeed, one could hardly walk by a book kiosk or table in Moscow during that

summer without passing either *Icebreaker* or Suvorov's follow-up work, *Den'-M.*[2] Gabriel Gorodetsky's *The Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia* was written, in part, to respond to Suvorov's claims. But Gorodetsky has higher aspirations than merely refuting what is essentially a mendacious and unsubstantiated argument based on preconceived notions of what Stalin and Soviet communism were about. Rather, Gorodetsky's primary goal is to present "a coherent analysis of Stalin's policies which not only challenges the standard interpretations but produces a completely new narrative" (p. xii).

Gorodetsky can make this claim, in part, because of his unprecedented access to previously unavailable material, including records from the Soviet foreign ministry, Soviet military intelligence, the NKVD, the Red Army's General Staff, the Presidential Archive (to which access is now restricted), and the personal files of important players such as Viacheslav Molotov, Andrei Vyshinsky, Ivan Maisky, and V. G. Dekazanov. Archival materials from Yugoslavia, Bulgaria,

Germany, and Britain supplement and contextualize this already impressive source base.

Gorodetsky's substantial research easily refutes Suvorov's thesis: there is no indication that Stalin was planning to go to war against Germany in the summer of 1941. On the contrary, Gorodetsky's Stalin was a cautious and increasingly timid leader, trying to protect the Soviet Union's national security interests while desperately hoping to delay a war with Germany, until at least 1942 or preferably even 1943 when Stalin believed the Red Army would be truly capable of dealing with the *Wehrmacht*. These twin considerations dominated his foreign policy to the exclusion of all other concerns. Unfortunately for Stalin, these goals became increasingly incompatible and eventually untenable as they conflicted with changing German interests. The tragedy for the Soviet Union and its citizens was that, despite growing warnings, Stalin deluded himself into thinking that his policy was working, until the actual German invasion told him otherwise.

Gorodetsky argues that Stalin consistently followed a "balance of power" policy even before the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. To Stalin, the Pact was purely defensive. Rather than viewing the coming war as an opportunity to spread world revolution, he hoped to keep the militarily unprepared Soviet Union out of the conflict. To that end, he followed a policy of strict neutrality, and feared that both Germany and Britain might attempt to draw the Soviet Union into the war. If Stalin saw the war as a chance for the Allies and Germany to bleed themselves white and let the Soviets move in and pick up the pieces, as others have argued, then it is not evident in the documents.<sup>[3]</sup> In this light, the Soviet territorial acquisitions of 1939-40 were not part of any pre-conceived plans for expansion but instead were made in response to German gains, necessary to help the Soviets secure their position in Europe (i.e. the annexation of Eastern Poland came following the German conquest of Western Poland, the annexations of the Baltic

States and the seizure of Romanian lands occurred in the context of the fall of France and the Low Countries). While Gorodetsky may be right about the timing of these actions, many historians might still question his portrayal of Stalin's motives in these cases as being primarily defensive.

While Stalin sought to avoid war, he nonetheless was determined to protect Soviet national security interests. The Balkans became the key arena in which the Nazis and Soviets vied for influence, and Gorodetsky exhaustively tracks the feverish diplomatic activity of all the players. Hitler viewed the Balkans as critical to safeguarding his rear in Europe against British encroachments, while other German officials saw the area as a fundamental component of a German-organized "Continental bloc" directed at the British. Stalin regarded the Balkans, particularly Bulgaria, as critical to protecting both the Turkish straits and Ukraine from attack. Gorodetsky contends that although Hitler eventually triumphed in the diplomatic maneuvering, bringing Rumania and Bulgaria into the Axis camp by the winter of 1941, the collision of German and Soviet interests in the Balkans ultimately led him to opt for war against the Soviet Union. According to Gorodetsky, the timing of the issuance of the Barbarossa Directive indicates that Hitler's motivation for war emerged from geopolitical, and not ideological, considerations. Failed German efforts to convince Molotov, during his visit to Berlin in November 1940, that the USSR's true interests lay towards Asia and the possessions of the British Empire helped to convince Hitler that it was impossible to come to a mutual understanding with the Soviets in the Balkans. The straw that finally broke the camel's back, as far as Hitler was concerned, was the collapse of the Danube Conference negotiations over the issue of control of the Danube's delta. The Soviets proposed that they and the Rumanians should establish exclusive joint control of the delta, which would effectively cut off the Germans from the Black Sea. This occurred on 17 December

1940. The next day Hitler issued the order to begin planning for Operation Barbarossa.

Thus Gorodetsky places the decision to go to war squarely on Adolf Hitler. Although the Germans perceived that Soviet actions in the Balkans were interfering with their plans, they did not believe that the Soviets posed a military threat to those interests. Neither Hitler nor his generals even contemplated the possibility of a Soviet attack. Hitler's declaration that Barbarossa was really a pre-emptive strike was made after the invasion took place, but it certainly was not a part of the initial justifications for the invasion. Gorodetsky cites General-Major Erich Marcks, one of the planners of Barbarossa, as saying that the Red Army would not give the Germans 'the courtesy of attacking' (p. 86).

Gorodetsky's analysis also refutes current hypotheses of aggressive Soviet intentions.[4] He convincingly argues that Stalin's address to the military graduates in May 1941, often cited by advocates of the "Stalin was planning to attack" school, actually was an attempt to bluff the Germans into thinking that the Soviet forces were stronger than they were, while simultaneously bolstering the morale of an army suffering from the purges, the blunderings of the Winter War with Finland, and shaken by the effects of a massive and chaotic reorganization. His in-depth analysis of Red Army deployments throughout the first six months of 1941 reveals an army leadership uncertain of German intentions and their possible invasion routes, and unable to persuade the civilian leadership (i.e. Stalin) to take the full, necessary measures to mobilize the armed forces. While the Nazi subjugation of Yugoslavia convinced Stalin that some military precautions had to be taken, he ordered the Red Army's Marshal Timoshenko and General Zhukov to deploy their forces away from the German-Soviet border to avoid provocations or accidental incidents. Although Zhukov did propose a pre-emptive strike on 15 May 1941, Stalin did not approve this plan.

The next day Zhukov ordered a defensive deployment, which remained largely unchanged until 22 June. As the signs of the coming German attack were becoming impossible to ignore, Stalin refused to allow army units to assume combat positions, although he did permit some limited reinforcements.

As the German army deployed east during this period, Stalin desperately, and recklessly, clung to his belief that the Germans did not really want to attack the USSR, and that if they did, they would first offer an ultimatum, giving him some advanced warning--and the possibility of coming to terms with Hitler. Hence Stalin pursued a policy of appeasement, hoping to pacify the Nazis, or at the very least trying to buy more time to prepare Red Army for an eventual conflict. Thus, Gorodetsky contends that Stalin negotiated the Soviet-Japanese non-aggression pact, signed in April 1941, not to protect his Asian flank, but rather as a means to draw closer to the Axis powers as a prelude to negotiations with Germany. Similarly, he argues that in the spring of 1941, Stalin considered dissolving the Comintern, and in fact, told its representatives to loosen their ties with Moscow, because the Soviet leader believed that these actions would increase the possibility of successful negotiations with Germany.

Gorodetsky also points to the nature of the Soviet political system as an important contributor to the debacle of June 1941. The only formal coordination of Soviet security policy among all the responsible agencies and departments occurred at the very top in the Politburo, and with Stalin himself. The *Vozhd's* desire to avoid war at almost any cost was well known in Soviet diplomatic, military, and intelligence circles, and itself was devastating to the USSR's national security. The intelligence services themselves had been devastated by the purges and no analyst was prepared to present an interpretation which differed from Stalin's views. Although Soviet intelligence was providing an increasing amount of raw data

pointing to a probable German attack, an analyst could find enough ambiguities, discrepancies, and contradictions in this information--often facilitated by German disinformation--to support Stalin's views. Hence, while a significant portion of the raw information suggested an invasion sometime in the late spring or early summer of 1941, the analysis of this intelligence, which was passed on to Stalin, argued that the build-up was intended only to intimidate the Soviets into making unspecified concessions as part of the eventual re-negotiation of the Soviet-German relationship. Stalin continued to believe, despite growing evidence to the contrary, that the Germans would present these demands shortly. Consequently, Stalin snapped at any chance to negotiate with the Germans, even as late as May 1941, when through a combination of German disinformation and sincere misinterpretations on the part of both Stalin and German Ambassador Schulenberg, Stalin believed that Hitler was on the verge of opening serious negotiations (Gorodetsky refutes the commonly accepted idea, on the basis of newly uncovered evidence, that Schulenberg in these meetings revealed the actual plan and date of Barbarossa). Thus the very nature of the Soviet Union's political culture, with its pressures for conformity and obedience emanating from the top, contributed to a circular flow of misinformation and ineffective policies which further reinforced Stalin's self-delusions.

Stalin's self-delusions even blinded him to warnings from the outside. British efforts to warn the Soviets of the impending German attack, including Churchill's telegram of April 1941, when viewed through Stalin's prism of distrust of British motives, only served to intensify Stalin's suspicion that the British were trying to drag him into the war. Stalin's fears were further enhanced by occasional British hints, particularly from Ambassador Sir Stafford Cripps, that Britain might be forced to sign a separate peace with Germany. Similarly, Stalin believed that Rudolf Hess's flight to Britain might be a prelude to such negotiations.

Gorodetsky's narrative is indeed most convincing. Much of it confirms what many historians had already suspected regarding Stalin's views and policies towards Germany in early 1941. His extensive source base, however, provides us with the clearest picture to date of the Soviet-decision making processes in the period 1939-1941. Critical to the argument is the compelling portrayal of Stalin as a scared and delusional practitioner of *realpolitik*. This portrait of Stalin as a realpolitiker in foreign policy not only fits with the evidence discussed in the book, but is also quite consistent with Stalin's foreign policy before, during, and especially after the war, which was hardly indicative of a fomenter of world revolution. Of course, Stalin's foreign-policy decisions were shaped by ideological concerns and visions, but the range of choices within his ideological framework permitted policies of relative accommodation with the West in order to preserve Soviet security, even if those relations were also marked by extreme suspicion and hostility. Then, too, it is important to remember that even pragmatists can be self-delusional, and can make mistakes.

Gorodetsky's down-playing of ideology is less convincing when applied to Hitler and his decision to invade the Soviet Union. He argues that the timing of the decision--after the collapse of the Danubian negotiations, and after German efforts

to redirect Soviet interests away from the Balkans had come to naught--indicates that there was little ideological basis for Barbarossa. These justifications, he argues, came after the decision had been already made. As opposed to Stalin's case, where it is possible to corroborate the Soviet leader's moves in 1939-41 with other his other foreign policies, this conclusion is not warranted for Hitler and his actions in the Soviet Union. A central underpinning of Nazi ideology was the necessity of obtaining *Lebensraum* in the East, which was linked to the ideological imperative of exterminating Bolshevism and subjugating the "sub-human" Slavs. Hitler's subsequent policies in the Soviet Union followed these ideas consistently. A *realpolitik* approach to the invasion of the Soviet Union would have accommodated and encouraged collaboration with internal anti-Soviet elements, and would not have pursued the Nazis' extremely costly and short-sighted ideological and racialist program. Gorodetsky's dismissal of an ideological motive, which could easily co-exist with his analysis of the *timing* of the decision to invade Russia, reduces to a questionable extent a fundamental aspect of the Second World War, namely its ideological character. Although Stalin and Hitler were the heads of two explicitly ideological--if not to say totalitarian--states, this does not necessarily mean that they approached foreign policy in the same way.

A final, minor criticism is his handling of certain "well-known" documents, such as Stalin's address on 5 May 1941 to the military academy graduates, and the 14 June 1941 TASS communiqué--stressing that all was well with Soviet-German relations. My problem here is not with the analysis of these texts but with their presentation: Gorodetsky simply states his analysis without actually describing the texts' actual contents. For specialists this obviously is not a problem, but for more general readers--and hopefully there will be many--this lack of context might pose some diffi-

culty in understanding both what these texts actually said, and their significance.

These are not substantial shortcomings given the scope and intent of the book. *Grand Delusion* is a work of immense importance, and will be valued for years to come. And it should hopefully sink, once and for all, the baseless Suvorov "Icebreaker" thesis, which ought to be located in the "alternative history" section of the local bookstore. If we are fortunate, a Russian edition might make its way to Moscow's book kiosks and stores where, with any luck, my friend Aleksandr Mikhailovich will pick up a copy.

#### Notes

[1]. "Suvorov's" real name is V. Rezun. For an extended discussion of the *Ledokol'* debate, see Teddy J. Ulricks, "The Icebreaker Controversy: Did Stalin Plan to Attack Hitler?" *Slavic Review* 58, no. 2 (Fall 1999), pp. 626-643.

[2]. Viktor Suvorov, *Ledokol': Kto nachal vtoruiu voinu?* (Moscow, 1992) and *Den-M: Kogda nachalas' vtoraiia mirovaia voina?* (Moscow, 1994).

[3]. See for example, Robert Tucker, *Stalin In Power: The Revolution From Above, 1928-1941* (New York, 1990), p. 592.

[4]. For a Western example, see R. C. Raack, "Stalin Plans for World War II," *Journal of Contemporary History* 26, no. 2 (1991) and *Stalin's Drive to the West: The Origins of the Cold War, 1938-1953* (Stanford, 1995); for a Russian view, see V. A. Nevezhin, *Sindrom nastupatel'noi voiny: Sovetskaia propaganda v predverii 'sviashchennykh boev', 1939-141 gg.* (Moscow, 1997).

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