

An Analysis of why Stalin is to Blame for the German Invasion

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Abstract

The German invasion of the Soviet Union in June of 1941 has long been attributed to errors by Joseph Stalin, yet a revisionist position known as the Icebreaker hypothesis has also emerged alleging that Stalin is not to blame. This essay examines why the Icebreaker theory is erroneous based on its lack of concrete facts. The reasons why Operation Barbarossa was so effective are also examined, leading to the conclusion that Stalin should still shoulder most of the blame for Soviet disorganization prior to the invasion.

The German invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941 came as a complete surprise to Soviet citizens. They had been told that Germany was a trustworthy ally. Yet when the attack occurred, Joseph Stalin and the Soviet leadership were not caught completely unaware. There had been numerous intelligence reports warning of the German invasion from a plethora of different sources. Also, previous German aggression indicated that Hitler would invade the Soviet Union to continue German territorial expansion. Stalin opted to disregard these warnings of a German invasion in the belief that such an invasion could be delayed, giving the Red Army time to grow stronger and more organized. The reasons for Stalin's decision are not entirely clear, yet his failure to give an adequate degree of concern to a possible German attack leaves him as the primary candidate to blame for the German invasion. Several authors have

made the argument, contemporarily known as the Icebreaker hypothesis, that Stalin was planning to attack the Germans before Operation Barbarossa was launched. Arguing this position shifts the blame away from Stalin. However, the Icebreaker hypothesis rests on tenuous facts and assertions that cannot be substantiated. Thus, the main factor in determining whether or not Stalin is to blame for the German invasion is why he did not heed intelligence reports warning of a German attack. This essay will argue that Stalin is to blame for the German invasion on 22 June 1941 because he ignored accurate intelligence reports and failed to prepare the Red Army to deal with the imminent threat of the German attack.

Before analyzing the events of June 1941, it is important to understand the background of Soviet defense plans, fortifications, and the condition of the Red Army. During the purges beginning in 1937, many military officers were removed. The purges continued through 1941, with the total number of purged between 1937 and 1941 now set at 54, 714.¹ The purges had negative consequences for the Red Army. To replace the purged officers, inexperienced junior officers were quickly promoted up the ranks. David M. Glantz notes that the purges created many command difficulties, which had destructive effects on planning and combat force readiness.² With constant changes in military leadership, it was difficult for the Red Army to formulate definitive military plans. Stalin engineered the ongoing purges, so the inexperience and lack of organization caused by the purges can be

attributed to his paranoid attitude about his military officers.

The disorganization of the Red Army caused by the purges is exemplified in the Winter War with Finland between November 1939 and March 1940. Despite Finland's comparatively small population, the Finns inflicted heavy losses on the Red Army. Eventually Finland was forced to sue for peace on 13 March 1940. However, the prestige of the USSR was diminished. Foreign nations viewed the Winter War as evidence of the Red Army's weakness. David E. Murphy notes that the Red Army's poor performance also provided Hitler with his assessment of Red Army capabilities, which played an important factor in Hitler's decision to launch Barbarossa.³ In addition, Bruce W. Menning states that the poor performance of the Red Army in Finland led Stalin to view all of his generals, even the experienced competent ones, with a mixture of suspicion, distrust and contempt.⁴ The Winter War was important because it demonstrated the negative effects of Stalin's military purges and only increased his distrust of the military. Since it was Stalin's decision to attack Finland, his choices created the war and led to the Red Army's poor performance in the war.

After the Red Army offensive in Finland, defense plans were drafted to deal with possible invasions by other nations. The last official defense plan created prior to World War Two was drafted in 1938 by the Chief of

Staff at the time, V.M. Shaposhnikov, and signed by both Stalin and Molotov. The 1938 plan was revised in July of 1940. This version emphasized that a German invasion, supported by Finland, Italy and Romania, would likely occur north of the River San. On 5 October, Chief of Staff Meretskov and Defense Commissar Timoshenko submitted the plan to Stalin who rejected it. Stalin felt that Hitler's main objectives were "the grain in Ukraine and the coal of the Donbas."⁵ Thus, the General Staff had to redraft its defensive plans to incorporate the southwest front near Kiev as the primary theatre of combat. This revised plan was approved on 14 October. As Iu. A. Gor'kov notes, the draft plan submitted to Stalin was correct in its assessment of where the German attack would occur.⁶ Thus, like the military purges, Stalin's personal convictions about the nature of a German attack were detrimental to the Red Army. Stalin rejected the General Staff plan in place of his personal opinion, which later proved to be a catastrophic error.

Another important aspect of Soviet war planning was the use of defensive fortifications. The fortifications were initially created in 1923, and by the 1930s a string of fortifications spanned the Soviet Union's western borders. In 1938, thirteen fortified strongholds were constructed, manned by 18,000 troops.⁷ Eight more fortified regions were added in late 1938 and early 1939. As Glantz notes, the Red Army General Staff was impressed with Finland's use of defensive fortifications in the Winter

War, leading the Red Army to create twenty more new defensive fortifications during 1940 and 1941.⁸ The purpose of the fortifications was to allow the Red Army to mount a successful defense. Gabriel Gorodetsky explains that the fortifications would allow the Red Army to contain the enemy, absorb the first enemy offensive and subsequently deliver counter-attacks.⁹ Since the fortifications were designed to improve the Red Army's defensive abilities, Stalin made the appropriate decision to construct more fortifications.

Changes in Soviet borders created problems for this system of defensive strongholds. To compensate for the shift in the Soviet border, Stalin ordered the old defensive line to be dismantled and to move the machine guns to the new line. May 1941 decrees mandated that the fortifications were to be completed by 1 July 1941, yet progress was much slower than expected. By 4 June, the date of completion was pushed back to October 1941. Gorodetsky observes that construction was well underway prior to the German invasion.¹⁰ Yet when the German invasion came on 22 June, the fortifications were far from being combat ready. The fortified regions were only manned with thirty four percent of their required officers and only fifty percent of the required fortifications had been constructed.¹¹ Thus, the German invasion caught the Soviets in the midst of their transfer of equipment from the old fortifications to the new ones. Stalin ordered the transfer, so he is partially to blame for the disorganized

condition of the fortifications. If he had allowed the old fortifications to remain in existence, the German invasion likely could have been defended more effectively.

Despite the defensive emphasis indicated by the fortifications and official war plans, some revisionist historians contend that Stalin was planning to launch an attack on Germany. This stance has become known as the Icebreaker hypothesis after the publication of Viktor Suvorov's book with that title. Suvorov was a spy for the GRU (General Staff of the Soviet Armed Forces) who defected to the west in 1978. According to Teddy J. Uldricks, the essence of the Icebreaker is that Stalin wanted to exploit the war between the imperialist powers as a way to spread communist revolution, and that the German assaults would be like the icebreaker opening up this possibility.¹² As one example of Suvorov's theories, he does not see the division of Poland in 1939 as a way for the Red Army to buy time. Instead, Suvorov argues that the Polish corridors enabled Stalin to launch a surprise attack on Germany from the rear, an opinion quite contrary to conventional views.¹³

The Icebreaker argument is based largely on speculation, but several legitimate documents and events are often cited by Icebreaker advocates. One such document is the 15 May 1941 draft plan written by Chief of Staff Georgii Zhukov. The bulk of the plan details the number of men and amount of military equipment to be deployed to all the major Soviet fronts. One point of

debate is the request for a concealed troop mobilization to the western fronts. Another contentious issue is when Zhukov advises “to attack the German army while it is still in the deployment stage and has not yet had time to organize the front.”¹⁴ These statements are used by V.N. Kiselev to argue that the Soviet Union was preparing to attack Germany. Kiselev feels that since the covert troop mobilizations were carried out, this indicates Stalin approved of the entire 15 May draft plan.¹⁵

However, a closer examination of the 15 May draft plan and the context in which it was written reveals a much different conclusion. As Gor’kov points out, the plan called for mounting a defence along ninety percent of the front for approximately one month, and only later on could a possible offensive be considered.¹⁶ This conclusion is more accurate, taking into consideration the many defensive fortifications under construction by May 1941. The fortifications were meant to allow a successful counter-attack, not an aggressive strike. David E. Murphy contends that Stalin never saw Zhukov’s draft plan, but when Timoshenko and Zhukov discussed the pre-emptive strike idea with him on 12 May, Stalin rejected it.¹⁷ Stalin reluctantly agreed to the covert troop mobilizations, yet it was necessary for the operation to avoid provoking the Germans.

Constantine Pleshakov argues that the pre-emptive strike concept was a feasible logical course of action.¹⁸ Gorodetsky argues the contrary. He feels that rejecting

the pre-emptive strike was the right decision. He contends that it would have taken Zhukov at least until the end of July to deploy his forces, when the Germans would have vastly outnumbered the Soviets along the border. In addition, Gorodetsky feels that the January 1941 war games showed how weak the Red Army was, making them incapable of mounting a successful offensive.¹⁹ Thus, the idea of a pre-emptive strike was not a plausible option for the Soviets on 15 May.

The aforementioned war games are another point of conflict in the Icebreaker debate. The war games began on 2 January 1941 and lasted until 11 January. They pitted the Blues (Germans) against the Reds (Soviets), acting out several scenarios of a possible conflict between the two states.²⁰ Suvorov argues that the war games are an example of the Red Army offensive preparations for a war against Germany. According to Suvorov, the war games demonstrated that Soviet military leaders were not working on any defensive or counter-attacking plans. They were thinking of a way to expand Soviet territory through invading outlying nations.²¹ Gorodetsky refutes these claims, drawing on his wide access to Russia's archives and intelligence reports, to which Suvorov was not privy. Gorodetsky writes that neither of the two war games assumed a Soviet pre-emptive or aggressive strike. He concludes that both war games assumed a German offensive on various fronts and explored defensive responses to deal with the invasion.²² Gorodetsky's arguments are drawn

from sources in the Russian archives, his position holds more sway while Suvorov's views are not substantiated.

A final contentious issue pertaining to the Icebreaker theory is Stalin's 5 May 1941 speech to a group of graduates of sixteen military academies at the Kremlin. Albert L. Weeks argues that this speech is an example of Stalin's planned strike against the Germans. Stalin is quoted as saying "now that we have become strong, now is the time to go from defense to offense."²³ While the contents of this speech are debatable, the speech is widely acknowledged to have occurred in some form. John Lukacs notes that there are at least four or five versions of the speech, so it is not known for certain what Stalin said. Lukacs continues by arguing that the contents of a single speech are not justification for arguing Stalin had plans for a German invasion.²⁴ This conclusion seems justified, given the reality of the Soviet situation. Fortifications were being constructed, the January war games had not even considered an offensive, and Stalin was still doing whatever he could to avoid provoking the Germans. Additionally, it seems illogical that Stalin would disclose such a massive secret to young members of the military, since Stalin distrusted the military in general. The Icebreaker hypothesis is not a valid interpretation of events in June 1941. There is a lack of evidence to support Soviet offensive war plans, other than misconstruing isolated speeches and documents. A more important factor in determining

whether Stalin is to blame for the German invasion is looking at Soviet intelligence prior to Barbarossa.

The Soviet intelligence agency had three main sources: the GRU, NKGB and the Foreign Ministry. Prior to 22 June 1941, all of these agencies reported on a possible German attack. Alexander Dallin estimates at least eighty-four reports warning of the German invasion reached Stalin through a variety of means such as diplomatic leaks, coded dispatches and electronic intercepts.²⁵ This figure is surely an underestimate, since his article was published in 1991 when the archives were in the process of being opened. Nonetheless, there certainly was no shortage of intelligence reports warning of a possible German invasion.

These intelligence reports began with information on the increased German transfer of infantry and mechanized divisions to their eastern border in October 1940. The estimate at this time was eighty-five divisions deployed against the USSR.²⁶ Richard Sorge sent many reports of German plans to invade the USSR, beginning with a report on 18 November 1940 warning of German war preparations. On 5 May 1941 he sent a telegram stating the German invasion would come mid-June and, on 15 May, his telegram predicted an attack from 20 to 22 June.²⁷ Another spy, code-named Starshina, who had penetrated the Luftwaffe, also sent many warnings of a German attack. These culminated in a 17 June 1941 report warning that the German invasion would come at

any time.²⁸ A 29 December 1940 GRU report stated that war would be declared in March 1941, and a 9 March 1941 GRU report predicted April-May as the time of an invasion.²⁹ Additionally, Winston Churchill sent Stalin a long message on 17 April 1941 detailing what the British had uncovered about German deployments against the Soviet Union.³⁰ This wide variety of reports detailed the positions and numbers of German forces arrayed against the USSR and warned of a coming attack.

There were also numerous intelligence reports to the contrary. German disinformation played a significant role in these reports. Dmitri Volkogonov notes that Stalin received intelligence reports describing a defeatist mood and desertion in the German army.³¹ Also, German Armed Forces reports stressed the idea of an imminent English invasion throughout 1940 and 1941, even though Hitler had delayed the invasion indefinitely on 17 September 1940.³² These reports fit Stalin's belief that the Germans would launch an invasion against Britain before they attacked the Soviet Union. German disinformation also focused on stressing Ukraine as a possible target of a German invasion. From January to June 1941, this was reported frequently by the NKGB and NKVD.³³ This disinformation played a vital role in Stalin's policy-making. The German reports supported the revised 14 October 1940 defense plan, where Stalin insisted that the southwest would be the target of a German invasion. As Gorodetsky observes, German disinformation constituted an additional form of intelligence that

questioned the inevitability of a German invasion and presented alternative scenarios relating to the conditions in which a potential invasion could occur.³⁴ Therefore, Stalin received ample warning of a coming German attack, yet he chose to believe reports that reaffirmed his ideas of a German invasion coming after Britain had been defeated. Why did Stalin make this decision? There are many factors to take into consideration. The most important factors influencing Stalin were his desire to avoid provocations, his personal convictions about the nature of a German invasion, and the nature of intelligence collection.

The intelligence chief after July 1940 was Fillip Golikov who had a history as a loyal subject, even though he had no prior intelligence experience. He is infamous for pandering to Stalin to avoid confrontation. The most notable example of this is a 20 March 1941 report. This report stated that the German attack would be led under three groups and the attack would come between 15 May and 15 June.³⁵ However, Golikov added comments to the report stating “the opening of hostilities against the Soviet Union will occur in the wake of the victory over England” and intelligence reporting “the inevitability of war against the Soviet Union this spring should be evaluated as disinformation.”³⁶ Therefore, the German threat was downplayed by Stalin’s intelligence chief. Thus, part of the blame for Stalin’s underestimation of the German threat can be attributed to Golikov. On the other hand, Stalin’s previous intelligence chief, Ivan

Proskurov, was fired for contradicting Stalin, so Golikov's actions are understandable.

It is also necessary to consider the inherent flaws within all intelligence collection.³⁷ As Dallin notes, there is always correct information, yet it is usually accompanied by irrelevant information that can make it difficult to make an accurate decision.³⁸ This train of thought is echoed by Gorodetsky's argument that intelligence information either was altered to conform to Stalin's views, or was presented in an ambiguous way, which would only reaffirm Stalin's pre-existing views.³⁹ These assessments do not lessen the blame that should be placed on Stalin. Given similar intelligence reports, Zhukov and Timoshenko both recognized the German threat and requested more Soviet preparations. Stalin adhered to his desire to avoid any provocations, disregarding the accurate intelligence.

Stalin's wish to avoid provoking the Germans and setting off a conflict was based on his accurate assessments of both the Wehrmacht and the Red Army. He saw how the Wehrmacht had decimated France by the summer of 1940, and how the Red Army fared poorly in Finland in 1939-40 and in the January 1941 war games. Despite this seemingly logical caution to avoid provoking the Germans, Stalin took it to unreasonable extremes. As Murphy describes in detail, in the summer of 1940 Stalin permitted the Luftwaffe to conduct unlimited aerial reconnaissance flights over the Soviet Union. During

these flights, the Germans photographed Soviet fortifications, troop positioning, airfields, communications facilities, and vital supply routes.⁴⁰ When the German invasion came on 22 June, it went smoothly because the Germans knew the locations of Soviet equipment. Even though the NKVD informed Stalin that the aerial flights were used for intelligence collection, fear of provocation led Stalin to allow the flights to proceed. Murphy feels this decision was likely the single greatest error Stalin made between the summer of 1940 and 22 June 1941.⁴¹ Although Stalin's fear of provoking the Germans played a major role in facilitating the German invasion, it was not the major reason why Stalin disregarded reliable intelligence.

The most important factor influencing Stalin's actions in the period preceding the German invasion was his personal convictions on the nature of German intentions. As Kevin McDermott explains, Stalin did not believe that Hitler would open up a second front in the east without first defeating Britain on the western front.⁴² Stalin's assessment was likely based on the results of World War One, when fighting on two fronts led to Germany's eventual defeat in a war of attrition. Hitler did not want a war of attrition, which Stalin failed to fully comprehend.⁴³ Regardless, Britain was not defeated in June 1941, and Stalin felt that the Germans would not risk fighting on both fronts.

Stalin's personal convictions also led him to disregard Churchill's 17 April letter. Stalin had been suspicious of Britain for many years. Churchill was an outspoken critic of the Soviet Union, which only cemented Stalin's negative perception of Britain. As Glantz notes, Stalin's distrust of Churchill was based on Churchill's anti-Soviet views and diplomatic activities, many of which opposed Soviet interests.⁴⁴ Stalin distrusted Churchill and Britain prior to receiving Churchill's letter. As McDermott argues, Stalin felt the British, in a bid to ease their own plight, promoted the USSR's involvement in war with Germany.⁴⁵ If Germany were forced to open up a second front, they would not be able to concentrate on defeating Britain, giving Britain more leeway. Therefore, two of Stalin's convictions--that the British were not to be trusted and that Germany would not fight on two fronts--led him to disregard the accurate information Churchill submitted.

Additionally, the many GRU and NKVD intelligence reports warning of a German attack supported, rather than refuted, Stalin's belief that a war with Germany could be delayed until 1942. Numerous intelligence reports had predicted a German invasion to come in March, April, or May 1941. Such attacks never occurred, and Britain was not defeated yet. This conformed to Stalin's ideas that if the Red Army avoided provocations, war could be delayed and the Red Army could continue its modernization. As Glantz summarizes, active German disinformation efforts and the many delays in launching Barbarossa could have fostered Stalin's erroneous

misconception that war could still be delayed.⁴⁶ This rationale helps to explain why Stalin did not consider the intelligence reports as important as Zhukov and Timoshenko did.

Therefore, most of the available evidence indicates that Stalin's actions made the results of the German attack more devastating than it needed to be. He allowed unlimited aerial reconnaissance to occur between summer 1940 and June 1941, he purged over 50,000 members of the military, he disregarded accurate intelligence reports and insisted that defense plans be altered to adhere to his personal views. Gorodetsky makes a crucial argument when he states that the German invasion could at best have been softened, but not avoided altogether.⁴⁷ It is now clear that Germany intended to invade the Soviet Union, regardless of what the Soviets did. Gerhard L. Weinberg notes that by the end of July 1940, Hitler and the Wehrmacht decided to attack in spring 1941 "to develop the physical preparation of the logistic basis on the ground...as well as the theoretical preparations in the staff of the army, the air force, [and] the overall high command."⁴⁸ Weinberg also states that the Germans had very little intelligence on the Soviet Union, yet this did not dissuade their perceptions of Red Army capabilities in any way.⁴⁹ Therefore, Soviet actions had no influence on German plans to invade.

Consequently, the debate over whether or not Stalin is to blame for the German invasion is more about how the German invasion might have been softened. Dallin phrases the question as whether it would have made a difference if someone other than Stalin was the leader of the Soviet Union in the years preceding the German invasion.⁵⁰ Given the many detrimental choices Stalin made between 1937 and 1941, the answer is yes. Conversely, Stalin made efforts to expand and modernize the Red Army. He also oversaw relocations in Soviet defense industry towards more protected regions away from the western border, allowing wartime industry to function more effectively.⁵¹ It therefore becomes necessary to inquire whether or not the positives outweigh the negatives.

Stalin did much more to hamper Soviet war preparations and readiness than he did to help them. His excessive caution about Red Army capabilities is understandable, yet the Red Army's lack of preparation on 22 June resulted from Stalin's decisions. The purges severely weakened the Red Army and created command and organizational problems. Intelligence reports gave a very accurate portrayal of the Wehrmacht's intentions, yet Stalin opted for his own beliefs about what Germany would do. McDermott writes that "we cannot crawl into Stalin's head and be totally sure of his intentions," and as a result, an analysis of his actions is the most reliable source of reference.⁵² It leads to the conclusion

that Stalin is primarily responsible for the German invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941.

¹ David M. Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus: The Red Army on the Eve of World War*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 31.

² *Ibid.*, 29.

³ David E. Murphy, *What Stalin Knew: The Enigma of Barbarossa*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 54.

⁴ Bruce W. Menning, "Stalin's Dangerous Game," *Military Review* 80, no. 3 (2000): 96.

⁵ Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus*, 93.

⁶ Iu. A. Gor'kov, "Was Stalin Preparing a Pre-Emptive Strike Against Hitler in 1941?" *Russian Studies in History* 36, no. 3 (1997-98): 26.

⁷ Gabriel Gorodetsky, *Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 242.

⁸ Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus*, 149-151.

⁹ Gorodetsky, *Grand Delusion*, 241.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 242.

¹¹ Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus*, 151.

¹² Teddy J. Uldricks, "The Icebreaker Controversy: Did Stalin Plan to Attack Hitler?" *Slavic Review* 58, no. 3 (1999): 627.

¹³ Viktor Suvorov, *The Chief Culprit: Stalin's Grand Design to Start World War II*, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2008), 107.

¹⁴ Gor'kov, "Was Stalin Preparing," 38.

¹⁵ V.N. Kiselev, "Stubborn Facts Associated with the Beginning of the War," *Russian Studies in History* 36, no. 3 (1997-98): 9.

¹⁶ Gor'kov, "Was Stalin Preparing," 32.

¹⁷ Murphy, *What Stalin Knew*, 211.

¹⁸ Constantine Pleshakov, *Stalin's Folly: The Tragic First Ten Days of World War II on the Eastern Front*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005),

¹⁹ Gorodetsky, *Grand Delusion*, 240.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 127-28.

²¹ Suvorov, *The Chief Culprit*, 186.

²² Gorodetsky, *Grand Delusion*, 128.

²³ Albert L. Weeks, *Stalin's Other War: Soviet Grand Strategy, 1939-1941*, (Lanham: Roman and Littlefield, 2002), 94.

²⁴ John Lukacs, *June 1941: Hitler and Stalin*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 69, 70.

²⁵ Alexander Dallin, "Stalin and the German Invasion," *Soviet Union* 18, no. 1 (1991): 24.

²⁶ Gorodetsky, *Grand Delusion*, 55.

²⁷ Murphy, *What Stalin Knew*, 85-87.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

²⁹ Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus*, 235.

³⁰ Lukacs, *June 1941*, 72-73.