

June 2018

Operation Barbarossa Interpreted in Light of the Primacy of Stalin's Economic Plan and Trade with Germany

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Recommended Citation

Novey, Adam G. (2018) "Operation Barbarossa Interpreted in Light of the Primacy of Stalin's Economic Plan and Trade with Germany," *Bound Away: The Liberty Journal of History*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/ljh/vol2/iss1/2>

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Abstract

The controversy over who was the aggressor behind Operation Barbarossa, Hitler's 1941 attack on the Soviet Union, has focused largely on political and military analyses. However, a study of Soviet economics sheds critical light on this debate. The success of Joseph Stalin's regime rested squarely upon a foundation of economic growth. In the late 1930s, he viewed trade with Germany as the way to achieve his capital investment objectives. Any economic gains proffered by Stalin's Third Five-Year Plan would be threatened by the prospect of war. Thus, Stalin tenaciously held to his non-aggression pact with Germany. It is the contention of this paper that, due to the primacy of Stalin's economic plan involving trade with Germany, Stalin had no intent to violate the Molotov-Ribbentrop agreement. Hitler's attack was aggressive, not preemptive.

Keywords

Operation Barbarossa, Soviet Economics, Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, Third Five-Year Plan, Trade with Nazi Germany, Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Non-Aggression Pact, World War II

Introduction

When Adolf Hitler attacked the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, he contended that he was striking preemptively due to Joseph Stalin's supposed intent to attack Germany.¹ While Hitler's high command may have supported this evaluation, the historical record, as a whole, does not. Aside from political, diplomatic, and military reasons, one of the most compelling fields of study in which Stalin's innocence in Operation Barbarossa is evident is the area of economics. Specifically, a study of Stalin's trade relationship with Germany and its association with Stalin's capital investment under Russia's Third Five-Year Plan clearly demonstrates that Hitler's assertion of a preemptive strike is incompatible with the Soviet outlook during this period. Due to the Soviet Union's planning and attitudes toward economic development in the related areas of German trade and capital investment, Stalin had no intention of attacking Hitler as the *Führer* had charged.

Historiography and Methods

Historiographically, it has been only recently that Hitler's seventy-six-year-old argument has been resurrected. Christopher Kshyk, in his *Inquiries* journal article, "Did Stalin Plan to Attack Hitler in 1941," addresses Barbarossa's historiography. When Operation Barbarossa was launched in 1941, Stalin immediately formed a historiographical interpretation of the event, claiming that the Soviet Union was the victim of Hitler's aggression.² Because of the nature of Soviet rule, Marxist realpolitik interpretation absolving Stalin was propagated behind the iron curtain through much of Soviet history.³

On the other side of the iron curtain, Kshyk identifies two initial Western schools of interpretation. The first was the orthodox interpretation which exonerated Stalin, as did the Western counterpart of the Socialist school.⁴ This was initially fostered by Western leaders who perceived a need to promote solidarity among the Allies. The second initial Western view was that of the fascists. Hitler's

¹ Paul Smith, "Memorandum Between the Reich Foreign Minister and Soviet Russian Ambassador Dekanosov," June 22, 1941, accessed July 3, 2017, <http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/nsr/nsr-09.html#27>.

² J. V. Stalin, "Radio Broadcast," July 3, 1941, in Marxist Internet Archive, accessed July 3, 2017, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1941/07/03.htm>.

³ Christopher J. Kshyk, "Did Stalin Plan to Attack Hitler in 1941? The Historiographical Controversy Surrounding the Origins of the Nazi-Soviet War" *Inquiries* 7, no. 11 (2015): 8th paragraph, accessed July 3, 2017, <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/1278/did-stalin-plan-to-attack-hitler-in-1941-the-historiographical-controversy-surrounding-the-origins-of-the-nazi-soviet-war>.

⁴ *Ibid.*

claim to have launched Barbarossa as a preemptive strike against Stalin's aggression held salience, however, only until the end of his regime, allowing the Western and Russian interpretations to reign supreme until 1985.⁵ At that time, a radical revisionist work by Soviet defector, Victor Suvorov, revived the fascist interpretation fingering Stalin as the aggressor in Barbarossa.⁶ Suvorov supported his argument with Stalin's actions before the war involving his troop movements, munitions production, public statements, and foreign policies.⁷

This new revisionist school was refined by breakthroughs in understanding other Soviet military deployments contemporary to Barbarossa. In the late 1990s, B. V. Sokolov compared Stalin's preparations for his Finnish war to the creation of "Polish units" before Barbarossa, which seemed to demonstrate a similarity in aggression and intent to fight an offensive war.⁸ This Sokolovian school innovatively used simple comparison, rather than any documentary connection between the Finnish war and Barbarossa, to derive its conclusions.

Still another historiographical development occurred around this same time. Summaries of previously overlooked pre-Barbarossa speeches by Stalin were analyzed as evidence. For Albert Weeks, this was diplomatic evidence that Stalin planned to attack Hitler.⁹ This new Weeksist interpretation was contested by many orthodox historians, such as Geoffrey Roberts, who concluded that Stalin had rather announced peace in the face of a Germany unwilling to fight on two fronts, and John Erickson, who contended that Stalin was only considering war in the distant future.¹⁰ The use of this kind of indirect evidence by Weeksist revisionists represents a significant development in Barbarossa historiography.¹¹

Most of these arguments rest upon diplomatic papers, speeches, and military maneuvers. Few have taken the logical step to include Stalin's intent in other areas of his governance in their interpretations. It is the purpose of this study to support the contentions of orthodox Barbarossa historiography—which is of import to an accurate understanding of the Second World War—through a correlation between Stalin's economic outlook and his intent in Barbarossa. This will be done by analyzing Stalin's motives for his treaty with Germany, his vision of that treaty as it related to Soviet capital development, and primary sources from both the German and Russian sides. Pertinent secondary works will also shed light on Stalin's economic considerations surrounding Barbarossa. It will be demonstrated that

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Viktor Suvorov, *The Chief Culprit: Stalin's Grand Design to Start World War II*, (Anapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008), 41, 136, 207, 219.

⁸ "Did Stalin Plan to Attack Hitler in 1941?"

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

Stalin, because of his need to trade with Hitler in order to accomplish his goals, would not have risked being the aggressor in Barbarossa as Hitler claimed.

Stalin's Need for Economic Cooperation with Hitler

On August 23, 1939, Stalin signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact with Hitler. The context of this treaty provides valuable information on Stalin's attitude toward trade with Germany and economic development. A resolution by one of the Soviet Union's Councils of People's Commissars aptly demonstrates the problems which the Soviet Union faced in its economic development prior to its treaty with Germany. This resolution by a credible organ of the Soviet governmental system shows the depth to which the Soviet system had sunk in its attempts to transform Russia's agrarian economy into an urban proletariat utopia. It notes the "shameful collapse" of the economic system in areas of Ukraine.¹² It described what was seen as "sabotage of grain collection, which has been organized by kulak and counterrevolutionary elements" as a chief problem, although the peasants' unwillingness to give up their grain may reflect a preexisting problem with Soviet governance.¹³ The committee's response to this issue—refusing credit to certain villages, purging their populations, and isolating them from any outside support—illustrates the weakness in Russia's economic system, not only in the local inability to collect grain, but in the larger sense of the government having to resort to such means simply to feed their country.¹⁴ This source refutes any notion that Stalin did not have a pressing need to improve his country's economic system.

This grain issue was not the only problem which Stalin faced. Historian Nick Shepley notes how Stalin's Five-Year economic plans, which had commenced in 1928, aimed at "transforming the very nature of Soviet society."¹⁵ He describes how Stalin resorted to oppressive means where law and orderly formulations failed, such as in the case of grain collection. Included in this oppression was the Gulag system which, by setting an example of brutal slave labor, motivated the Russian people to work for less pay. Miller and Smith, both scholars of the University of Warwick, note that the "the threat of imprisonment" prompted lower "efficiency wages" for Soviet workers.¹⁶ These monetary savings of derived low wages were

¹² "Resolution of the Council of People's Commissars of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic and of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine on Blacklisting Villages That Maliciously Sabotage the Collection of Grain," December 6, 1932, accessed July 3, 2017, <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/archives/k2grain.html>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Nick Shepley, *Stalin, the Five Year Plans and the Gulags: Slavery and Terror 1929-53*, (Luton, UK: Andrews UK Limited, 2013).

¹⁶ Marcus Miller and Jennifer C. Smith. "In the Shadow of the Gulag: Worker Discipline Under Stalin" *Journal of Comparative Economics* 43, no. 3 (August 2015): 531.

marshalled by Stalin's government as an "investment surplus" for boosting the struggling Russian economy.¹⁷ Stalin had failed to promote a workable system through the 1930s. Any rational observer—as was Stalin—created in God's image to think reasonably could not but conclude that this economy operating in relative ideological isolation and relying on essentially martial law could not go on forever.

Pursuing a German Alliance

A study of the international dealings of Stalin indicates that this leader was moving toward a new kind of solution to this seemingly insurmountable problem. Otto Pick of the University of Surrey holds a strong Orthodox position on Barbarossa. Through this lens, he notes the Soviet progression from attempted ideological seclusion to openness with foreign powers. Pick's article demonstrates that ideological policy was soon found to be impracticable in Soviet economics, first in the style of Soviet structure, then in marketing an independent Comintern to the West, and finally in cooperating with the West.¹⁸ By 1934, Soviet official Maxim Litvinov noted that "we understand very well the difference between doctrine and policy."¹⁹ One must interpret this transition in terms of convenience. The Soviet government turned to new sources of assistance as they encountered difficulties in their internal condition. By 1939, Stalin was prepared both to revamp his economic system through a Third Five-Year plan and through new trade connections abroad to remedy what his government openly saw as problems arising "as a result of serious defects in the actual planning of our national economic development."²⁰

To reach these new goals, Stalin's Third Five-Year Plan, drafted by V. Molotov, called for extensive capital investment, noting that "[t]he huge plan for the promotion of the national economy in the Third Five-Year Plan period necessitates new construction on a corresponding scale" in order to fulfill Marxist-oriented dreams of being able to economically "outstrip" capitalist nations rather than militarily surpass them.²¹ This called for the purchase of 181 billion rubles' worth of industrial equipment.²² Soviet hopes ran high on what this investment could remedy in Russia. Hydroelectric solutions to drought problems in the Volga region were meant to secure "plentiful harvests" and increased industrial output of

¹⁷ Ibid., 532.

¹⁸ Pick, Otto. "Soviet Alliance Policies in Retrospect" *International Journal* 22, no. 4 (Fall 1967): 576, 580-581.

¹⁹ Ibid., 582.

²⁰ V. Molotov, *The Soviet Union in 1942. The Third Five-Year Plan for the National-Economic Development of the U.S.S.R.* (New York, NY: Workers Library Publishers, Inc., 1939), 28, accessed July 3, 2017, <http://fau.digital.flvc.org/islandora/object/fau%3A4408>.

²¹ Ibid., 43, 70.

²² Ibid., 43-44.

consumption items for which over 16 billion rubles was earmarked in hopes of proffering a higher standard of living and true economic recovery and improvement.²³ The issue was where the Soviets might procure such funds and industrial technology to accomplish this goal. Molotov alluded to the answer when he stated that “we shall consider it our duty to utilize and apply extensively in our country all that is best in modern engineering and the technology of production...utilize[ing] the experience of other countries in all respects.”²⁴ Russia needed both foreign technology and foreign capital to make this economic solution work. What better place to get this than one of the most economically active nations in the world: Nazi Germany.

To this end, Russia began aggressively courting Germany for a deal by mid-spring of 1939. Correspondence produced by Ernst Weizsacker of the German Foreign Office indicates that as early as April 17, 1939, Russia had approached Germany about conducting a test of the ability of Russia to trade with Germany.²⁵ Weizsacker hesitated because of Russian relations with other Western countries. He then describes how the Russians continued circling the conversation back around to Soviet-German relations, alluding to the fact that “the Russian press lately was not fully participating in the anti-German tone” which it had previously.²⁶ He concluded by noting Russia’s propensity to establish trade relations out of utility rather than ideological considerations.²⁷ This document provides useful evidence of Stalin’s sense of urgency in establishing relations with Germany. While historians such as Gregory Popov, with his Marxist school background, claim that “Stalin had no economic reasons to secure contracts with Germany,” Stalin’s sacrificial attitude in aggressively pursuing relations with Germany demonstrates that this counterevidence fails to describe historical reality.²⁸

Through negotiations, Karl Schnurre, the German governmental minister who dealt with Eastern European commercial arrangements, reached an agreement with Russia on its economic development in which Stalin’s needs were addressed. This German picture of the event describes the process by which Germany would loan Stalin funds with which he would purchase German capital machinery, as well as how Russia would repay with their own natural resources.²⁹ This arrangement not only supplied funds to meet budgetary needs for important Soviet capital

²³ Ibid., 44-45.

²⁴ Ibid., 26.

²⁵ Weizsacker, Ernst. “Memorandum by the State Secretary in the German Foreign Office,” April 17, 1939, accessed July 3, 2017, <http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/nsr/nsr-01.html#1>.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Gregory Popov, “Trade with the Aggressor and the Pact Ribbentrop Molotov: Observations Inspired by Unknown Documents” *Studia Prawno-Ekonomiczne* 98 (2016): 96.

²⁹ Karl Schnurre, “Foreign Office Memorandum,” August 29, 1939, in the Avalon Project Archive, accessed July 3, 2017, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/ns059.asp.

construction, but also established a means by which Russia could procure foreign industrial technology. Considering Stalin's outlook in his Third Five-Year plan, this would have been the answer to some of his most pressing concerns.

Stalin's Commitment

Given this treaty's long-term importance to Stalin, one would expect him to be willing to commit himself in a respectively long-term manner to the treaty, being careful to observe and protect it. This is exactly what the historical record indicates. The 1939 pact with Germany exemplified Stalin's commitment and Hitler's noncommittal attitude. German insistence on receiving early payments on the loan indicated that Hitler wished to capitalize on the treaty with indifference to its future.³⁰ In contrast, Stalin's willingness to sacrifice in order to ultimately reap the benefits of such a treaty demonstrates a long-term commitment.³¹ The accompanying Non-Aggression Pact within this agreement stipulates a commitment of ten years of peaceful coexistence for the improvement of Germany and the Soviet Union.³²

Immediately, Stalin set to work to make the treaty last. Stalin fulfilled shipments of raw materials to the Reich, such as manganese exports amounting to 185,000 tons in 1940 alone.³³ These shipments of *Wehrmacht*-supporting materials would continue right up until Barbarossa, maintaining exemplary levels even in the winter of 1941, by which time Stalin had been warned repeatedly of Hitler's intent to attack.³⁴ Russian scholar Agota Gueullette affirms this, noting that Stalin continued to provide Hitler with militarily valuable items right up until Barbarossa.³⁵

Preeminent historian John Lukacs demonstrates that Stalin was so attached to his trade relations with Germany, being so desperate for economic answers to his nation's problems, that Hitler hesitated to "present demands to Russia, because he suspected Stalin might agree to them."³⁶ This almost reckless support of trade with Germany was unprecedented in his conciliatory actions just prior to Hitler's

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, August 23, 1939, article I, accessed July 3, 2017, <http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1939pact.html>.

³³ Gregory Popov, "Trade with the Aggressor and the Pact Ribbentrop Molotov: Observations Inspired by Unknown Documents" *Studia Prawno-Ekonomiczne* 98 (2016): 100.

³⁴ Ibid., 97; David E. Murphy, *What Stalin Knew: The Enigma of Barbarossa*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 85.

³⁵ Gueullette, Agota, "Soviet Concepts of Foreign Trade 1917-1945" *Soviet and Eastern European Foreign Trade* 27, no. 3 (Fall 1991).

³⁶ John Lukacs, *June 1941: Hitler and Stalin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006) 4.

Operation Barbarossa. Stalin was so fixated on protecting the peace that he allowed the *Luftwaffe* to scout over Russian land in the days before the offensive. David Murphy notes,

fearing that preventative action by Soviet air defenses would “provoke” Hitler, he issued strict orders against it. He would not change his views even after Soviet intelligence provided him with precise evidence that the flights were part of a German program to procure aerial photographs of Soviet fortifications, troop installations, airfields, and communications.³⁷

Thus, Stalin maintained almost fanatical adherence to his treaty with Germany. His work on capital construction using German goods was not nearly completed, so he held on to the treaty, yielding tragic consequences.

The Specter of War on Economic Gains

Perhaps Stalin may have considered what war would mean for his economic plans as evidence continued to mount for Hitler’s attack. It was this grim prospect which fueled his unconditional support of his non-aggression and economic pacts with Germany. Stalin would have known what war would do to his long-term economic investments for which his country had labored, and he wished to avoid that scenario at all costs.

Instead of developing a hypothetical model of what Stalin’s economic plans might have faced had he gone to war, a look at what actually occurred in 1941 provides a more accurate picture. Stalin immediately realized how significantly the war imperiled his plans. In his first public address following Barbarossa, he declared in customary propagandistic manner that

[a]bove all it is essential that our people, the Soviet people, should appreciate the full immensity of the danger that threatens our country and give up all complacency, casualness and the mentality of peaceful constructive work that was so natural before the war, but which is fatal today, when war has radically changed the whole situation. The Soviet people must realize this and abandon all complacency; they must mobilize themselves and reorganize all their work on a new, war-time footing, where there can be no mercy to the enemy.³⁸

He acknowledged that the demise of peaceful industrial growth was ensured and that the Soviet people must resign themselves to the destructive and wasteful—yet

³⁷ *What Stalin Knew*, 162.

³⁸ “Radio Broadcast.”

necessary—pursuit of war production. He again drew upon this theme in his November 6, 1941, speech in which he noted that rather than continuing an era of “peaceful construction,” his country would have to fight a reactionary war against fascist Germany.³⁹ He further notes that “[t]he war has considerably curtailed and, in some branches, altogether stopped, our peaceful constructive work.”⁴⁰ Stalin recognized that the war was already having devastating effects on his economic plans.

Historian Rebecca Manley incorporates both Orthodox dogma and Revisionist sentiment in her work in that she predicts Stalin’s eventual propensity toward an “offensive war,” yet recognizes Hitler’s startling initiative in Barbarossa.⁴¹ She provides a work which describes how wartime evacuation was accomplished throughout the Great Patriotic War.⁴² Detailed governmental policies concerning evacuation are compared with what actually transpired.⁴³ By so doing, she shows how devastating the war was on Soviet industry. She displays the vulnerability of the industrial sector in the event of war in describing Stalin’s evacuation priorities.⁴⁴ Stalin was accurate when he declared that the war would bring an end to his personal achievements in Soviet economics.

Even before the war, government officials recognized how wartime necessities, such as blackouts, would “cause damage to industry...and upset the public.”⁴⁵ Just how much the war actually cost Soviet economic plans is studied by prestigious economist Susan J. Linz. She addresses how the cost of the Second World War to Russia involves measuring the immediate cost of the war, the post-war “unabsorbed costs,” and the longer-term “carryover costs.”⁴⁶ She covers the losses of Russia in human capital, budgetary expenditure, and “capital stock,” concluding that the extent of the cost had implications for the subsequent events of the Cold War and the reparations issue.⁴⁷ The major loss she tracks in the area of industry demonstrates that Stalin’s long-established goals of capital building through trade with Germany, and its resulting peace, were in direct contradiction to the concept of war with Germany and were imperiled by the same. Thus, if Stalin

³⁹ J. V. Stalin, “Speech at Celebration Meeting of the Moscow Soviet of Working People's Deputies and Moscow Party and Public Organizations,” November 6, 1941, in Marxist Internet Archive, accessed July 3, 2017, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1941/11/06.htm>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Rebecca Manley, *To the Tashkent Station: Evacuation and Survival in the Soviet Union at War*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 25.

⁴² Ibid., 2.

⁴³ Ibid., 24, 48

⁴⁴ Ibid., 34, 44.

⁴⁵ *What Stalin Knew*, 212.

⁴⁶ Susan J. Linz, “Measuring the Carryover Cost of WWII to the Soviet People: 1945-1953” *Explorations in Economic History* 20, no. 4 (October 1983): 375.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 376-377, 384.

had wanted to break his treaty with Germany, he would lose all the essential gains he had accomplished through trade with Hitler.

Interpretations and Conclusion

It is clear that Stalin did not desire war because of his capital-building relations with Germany. Stalin was committed to his economic plans, often advertising them in propaganda as being of higher importance than societal values such as religion and advocating for their successful completion.⁴⁸ He saw a relationship with Germany as the best—if not the only—way to achieve his Third Five-Year Plan's essential goals and was persistent against German reluctance to acquire a treaty. Once he had secured an agreement, he could not risk war because of the trade's importance to his nation. It may be contended that this argument for Stalin's disinterest in war could be applied to Hitler. However, while Stalin's motive in signing a pact with Germany in 1939 was economic, Hitler had diplomatic reasons in mind, which could be much more easily broken off than Stalin's long-term economic goals.⁴⁹

It has been demonstrated that the key importance of accomplishing the stipulations in his Third Five-Year Plan motivated Stalin both to join hands with Germany and to continue his peaceful relations with Hitler until the latter broke away via Barbarossa. Stalin's goal was long-term capital growth, which was only possible through German technology and capital. His need for these had not subsided at the time of Operation Barbarossa. Additionally, war would destroy any economic gains Stalin had accomplished through trade with Germany. Thus, due to Stalin's desperate need of trade with Hitler in order to accomplish his capital-developing goals, the Soviet Union would not have risked losing their economic gains by being the aggressor in Barbarossa as Hitler had charged.

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⁴⁸ Yuri Pimenov, *For the Industrial Plan; For Completing a Five-Year Plan in Only Four; Against Religion*, 1930 (Poster) as Translated in *The Stalin Era*, 54 (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000) 54.

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