



Barbarossa, 1941: Reframing Hitler's Invasion of Stalin's Soviet Empire

by Frank Ellis.

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The struggle on the Eastern Front in World War II was once called “the unknown war.” Now, however, the publication of documents from the administration of Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev and the partial release of some other archival material after the fall of the Soviet Union, together with available German documentation, have enabled Russian and Western scholars¹ to paint a much more accurate, detailed, and nuanced picture of the fighting in the East.

In *Barbarossa, 1941*, independent scholar Frank Ellis, a specialist in the Ostkrieg,² has brought to bear the new documentation³ and other primary sources,⁴ including his own translation of the diary of Caspar von Wiedebach-Nostitz, a soldier in the Twentieth Panzer Division; the diary gives a private's view of the Wehrmacht's triumphant advance toward Moscow and its bloody retreat beginning in December. Most accounts depict Operation Barbarossa as a whirlwind advance, but what German troops on the ground went through was a long, difficult, and deadly trek.

Instead of a detailed operational description of Barbarossa, Ellis offers a meditation on the nature of the Soviet state and, to a much lesser degree, the Third Reich, with the intent to, as his subtitle indicates, “reframe” the history of the German attack on the USSR. Specifically, he rejects the notion that the Soviet Union was the “victim” of Operation Barbarossa. National Socialist Germany and Stalinist Russia were, in his view, essentially identical regimes. “Both states were vying for the totalitarian domination of Europe” (xx). Although Ellis does not explicitly employ the theory of totalitarianism, its doctrines and propensities pervade his book's narrative.

The Katyn murders are important for an examination of the Commissar Order because Soviet thinking behind the decision to murder Polish prisoners of war has much in common with Nazi thinking behind the decision to kill commissars. This is just one of several indices demonstrating the closeness of the two totalitarian regimes.... I propose to readers of this book that it is implausible (to put it mildly) to believe that the knowledge of this monstrous crime [mass death in the Ukraine] and others committed by the Soviet state did not shape German attitudes toward that state, never mind the attitudes of fanatical Nazis. And it was here that objective, veracious, and verifiable evidence of Soviet criminality combined with Hitler's psychopathic hatred of Jews to form a fateful and utterly catastrophic union. (xii, xiv)

1. E.g., Gabriel Gorodetsky, *Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 1999); David M. Glantz, *Barbarossa: Hitler's Invasion of Russia, 1941* (Stroud, UK: Tempus, 2001); Omer Bartov, *The Eastern Front, 1941-45: German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare*, 2nd ed. (NY: Palgrave, 2001); David Stahel, *Operation Barbarossa and Germany's Defeat in the East* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2009).

2. His earlier work includes *The Damned and the Dead: The Eastern Front through the Eyes of Soviet and Russian Novelists* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2011) and *The Stalingrad Cauldron: Inside the Encirclement and Destruction of the 6th Army* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2013).

3. Mainly the multi-volume *Organy gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti SSSR v Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voine* [Organs of State Security of the USSR in the Great Fatherland War].

4. An appendix to the book contains seven important, translated Soviet documents.

This conclusion about what ordinary Germans knew or thought is not supported by any serious public opinion research. Moreover, typical Germans did not make policy in the Third Reich.

Ellis shifts some blame for the Nazis' invasion of the USSR and their subsequent war crimes to the Russians themselves. He criticizes "the reluctance of some German historians to consider Soviet behavior and ideological influences on German planning for Barbarossa..." (xiii), singling out Omer Bartov, whose well received work⁵ attributes the atrocities committed by ordinary German soldiers to Nazi propaganda and the Reich's socialization process. Bartov fails, writes Ellis, to see that Germans in general, not only fervent Nazis, had real cause to fear and hate the Bolshevik state. "Utterly decisive was the seizure of power by [V.I.] Lenin in Russia in 1917 and the consequences of the emergence of this totalitarian state, a new type of state for Germany (and others)" (xvi).

There are, however, some surprising gaps in Ellis's investigation. He overlooks Hitler's intent to carry out a demographic revolution in Europe by not only exterminating the Jews but also displacing, enslaving, and killing the Slavic peoples of Eastern Europe. In this, he was motivated not by fear of the *Untermenschen*, but by a desire to dominate and exploit them.

Loyal Nazis committed terrible crimes on the Third Reich's behalf, not just because of Joseph Goebbels's bewitching propaganda or dread of the Gestapo, but, Ellis believes, because they appreciated Hitler's domestic and foreign policy successes and reasonably feared the menace of totalitarian Russia. Soviet citizens, by contrast, followed orders because they were terrorized by a barbaric regime. The Stalinist system was certainly coercive, but Ellis disregards the important work of social historians of twentieth-century Russia⁶ who have shown that relations between Soviet citizens and the Soviet state were far more complex than his simplistic model allows. Ellis also argues that not Stalin alone, but the Soviet Communist system itself fostered class struggle and that Lenin exhibited the same "psychopathic, irrational and ineffably insane hatred with which Hitler would later target Jews" (xix).

Ellis's claim that "Harsh terrain and brutally demanding weather in the high summer and in the depths of the Russian winter, never mind the Soviet counteroffensive, stopped the German advance on Moscow" (53) contrasts sharply with historian Evan Mawdsley's conclusion that the Red Army fought fiercely and inflicted heavy casualties on the invaders from the beginning.⁷ To be sure, long marches through woods, marshes, blazing heat, and freezing temperatures slowed the German advance, but Soviet resistance was the key element of the story.

The author provides more detail than most other studies of Barbarossa concerning German plans not only to annihilate the Red Army but also to devastate the Soviet civilian population. The Germans meant to seize much of the food produced by the rich black earth of the region in order to feed the Fatherland and occupied Europe despite any Allied blockade. He quotes the cold analysis of one planning document: "The consequence of this policy is that the entire forest zone, including the essential industrial centers of Moscow and Petersburg, will not be supplied. In other words, these northern regions would starve" (57). Ellis sees this calculated inhumanity as "inspired, in part, by the food-requisitioning policies (*prodrazverstka*) adopted by the Soviet regime during the civil war..." (59). The notorious "commissar order" had mandated the immediate execution of captured Communists in the Red Army: "because the military commissars, like the NKVD with which they closely cooperated, were an integral part of the Soviet terror apparatus, operating outside the customs and rules of war estab-

5. See note 1 above.

6. E.g., Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power: The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd* (NY: Norton, 1976); Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1999), Lewis Siegelbaum and Andrei Sokolov, *Stalinism As a Way of Life* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2004).

7. *Thunder in the East: The Nazi-Soviet War, 1941-1945* (NY: Bloomsbury, 2005) 107-11.

lished by international law, their entitlement to protection under The Hague and Geneva Conventions is not a given” (84).

Ellis revives the preventive war argument used to justify the German assault on the USSR in 1941, rejecting Victor Suvorov’s “icebreaker” thesis⁸ that Operation Barbarossa succeeded so dramatically because it caught Soviet forces unwisely preparing to attack Hitler’s empire instead of readying themselves to defend their homeland. But Ellis undermines his own work in granting that “Based on ... primary sources, Suvorov’s arguments and analyses are often robust, insightful, and not easily dismissed” (402). His determination to condemn the Soviet Union leads him to speculate that

such a plan [to attack Germany] does exist, but it has not been declassified. If such a plan ever came to light, it would be a stunning vindication of Suvorov’s Stalin attack thesis.... But it would also mean that the Western view of World War II, especially the relationship between National Socialist Germany and the Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist Soviet Union, would be changed forever. (437)

He seems unaware that many Western and Russian scholars have demolished Suvorov’s work.⁹

Although Ellis admits that ordinary Germans, not just zealous Nazis, hated and rightly feared the Bolshevik state’s “propagation of class war, extermination of class enemies, and world revolution...” (90) chiefly because of years of exposure to Nazi propaganda, he insists that the Soviet threat was real. He adduces Lenin’s incendiary writings, the formulaic radicalism of Comintern propaganda, and the domestic brutality of the Stalinist regime. In the process, he overlooks the fact that Hitler’s rhetoric and behavior forced Moscow to seek an anti-German alliance between late 1933 and August of 1939 and that Stalin outdid Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and other appeasers in his efforts to cooperate with Germany in 1939–41.

Chapter 4 concerns Russian intelligence regarding German actions and intentions before 22 June 1942. Ellis shows that Soviet intelligence organizations (the GRU, NKVD, and NKGB) provided detailed, damning, multi-sourced information about the likelihood of a Nazi assault on the USSR. Notwithstanding some contradictory bits of evidence and disinformation, no reasonable person could doubt that the German dictator aimed to strike the Soviet Union. Stalin, of course, clung to what Gabriel Gorodetsky calls his “grand delusion” that the enemy buildup on the border was saber rattling meant to extract further concessions from Moscow or else the work of renegade German generals. The three intelligence chiefs—Fillip Golikov, Lavrentii Beria, and Vsevolod Merkulov—displayed more prudence than character in spinning the intelligence reports to suit their master’s preconceptions.

Chapter 5 covers the NKVD during the early stages of the German invasion. Ellis discusses orders by Stalin and others that Red Army soldiers and officers who retreated without authorization should be shot and their families severely punished. He recounts the interrogation and trial of Gen. Dmitrii Pavlov, commander of the Soviet western front, on trumped-up charges of betraying the defense of the central sector of the front and having been an anti-Soviet conspirator since the mid-1930s. Stalin needed a scapegoat for his own disastrous failures. This sort of travesty was repeated many times, as Beria executed scores of army and air force generals for alleged incompetence and treason. “The arrest of senior military commanders and military specialists in the first half of 1941 and immediately after the German invasion suggests that the process of finding scapegoats for Soviet military failures was under way *before* the Germans invaded and *before* Pavlov was arrested” (277). Stalin’s bizarre, dysfunctional,

8. See *Icebreaker: Who Started the Second World War?* (NY: Viking, 1990).

9. See, e.g., Gabriel Gorodetski, *Mif Ledokola: Nakaune voiny* (Moscow: Progress-Akademiia, 1995); David Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus: The Red Army on the Eve of the War* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 1998); and Teddy J. Uldricks, “The Icebreaker Controversy: Did Stalin Plan to Attack Hitler?” *Slavic Review* 58.3 (1999) 627–44.

and homicidal mindset of the Great Purges period still persisted. Ellis also describes the formation of partisan units behind German lines and the massive, forced relocation of non-Russian Soviet populations—Finns, Poles, Romanians, Germans, Tatars, and others—on the grounds that some of them might become enemy agents.

Chapter 7 assesses Soviet depictions of the Russo-German struggle, focusing on three writers: Vasilii Grossman, Aleksandr Bek, and Konstantin Simonov. Here, too, we get a homily on the author's master theme: that the Soviets were as bad as (or worse than!) the Nazis.

Ellis ends by listing reasons why Barbarossa failed, among them the brutal treatment of Soviet POWs and the Germans' failure to capitalize on disaffection among the non-Russian nationalities. "A direct radio appeal (reinforced by a massive airdrop of leaflets) in which he promised self rule, abolition of the collective farms, restoration of the church, and an end to communism and in which he urged the people to turn against their oppressors—the NKVD, the commissars, and the party—would have caused utter panic among Stalin's entourage" (448). No doubt, but this misses the point that the Nazis had come not to liberate but to kill, pillage, and displace the Soviet peoples. The barbarous ill treatment of POWs and minority populations was no "mistake," but a core element of National Socialist ideology.

Frank Ellis's discussion of Soviet intelligence about German intentions before 22 June 1942 and the NKVD's enforcement of discipline and political reliability during the early months of the war is perceptive and welcome, as is his use of the German soldier's diary. His ongoing polemic about the evils of the Soviet system will please diehard Cold Warriors. But the book blurs the true nature of Nazi ideology and the horrors that Operation Barbarossa inflicted on the Soviet people; general readers and students, let alone specialists, can find more compelling recent introductions to its much debated subject.