



# THE AMERICAN SPECTATOR

EDITED BY R. EMMETT TYRRELL, JR.

## Operation Barbarossa and How Germany Helped Create the Soviet Union

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June 22, 2021

On June 22 80 years ago, Germany launched Operation Barbarossa, invading the Soviet Union in a war that stretched along an 1800-mile front. Less than four years later, the Red Army captured a ruined Berlin. Much of Central and Eastern Europe also was occupied by the Soviets, destined to become little more than “satellites” of Moscow. In this way, Nazi Germany turned its primary ideological enemy, the USSR, into a global power.

Unfortunately, Berlin made a habit of underestimating Russia. In 1917, Imperial Germany was being bled to death in a multi-front war. A liberal revolution deposed the czar, but the leftist provisional regime continued the war. How to knock out one of Germany’s enemies? The Kaiser’s government implemented what proved to be an all-too-successful plan to turn Vladimir Ilyich Lenin into a weapon by helping him travel from neutral Switzerland back to Russia, from which he had been exiled.

Berlin figured that the slightly mad ideologue would join other political agitators and help weaken the Russian Empire. But Germany got more than it expected. At the train station in Zurich, Lenin told a friend as he departed, “Either we’ll be swinging from the gallows in three months or we shall be in power.” It actually took seven months, but he improbably ended up in charge of a new revolutionary state. The Soviet Union was born, from which many evils flowed.

Still, the horrors perpetrated by Moscow, though enormous, were mostly limited by national boundaries. The horrendous civil war killed millions, as the Soviets finally consolidated power after defeating multiple opponents. Following Lenin’s premature death, Joseph Stalin seized power, successively purging and murdering his rivals. He starved the peasants, most notably in Ukraine, as he collectivized agriculture and industrialized the country.

He also unleashed the Great Terror upon his countrymen, focused on members of the Soviet Communist Party and Red Army. Most dramatically, he orchestrated infamous show trials of his one-time colleagues. So prodigious was the slaughter that the secret police, then known as the NKVD, had trouble keeping up. Social scientist R. J. Rummel reported that

*murder and arrest quotas did not work well. Where to find the “enemies of the people” they were to shoot was a particularly acute problem for the local NKVD, which had been diligent in uncovering “plots.” They had to resort to shooting those arrested for the most minor civil crimes, those previously arrested and released, and even mothers and wives who appeared at NKVD headquarters for information about their loved ones.*

Such was life in the workers’ paradise. But few people living outside the USSR’s borders were bothered. By 1939, a terrible calm had returned. The gulag was full, and Stalin no longer was signing lengthy death lists of people who had committed no crime other than existing. His hold on power was secure, but he worried about a new threat: Adolf Hitler’s Third Reich, which targeted Moscow as its main enemy.

But that problem appeared to be solved by the Hitler–Stalin or Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact — formally titled the “Treaty of Non-Aggression between Germany and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics” — signed on August 23, 1939. A week later the Wehrmacht invaded Poland, which disappeared as a nation after Moscow grabbed its share of spoils in the east. After achieving victory there, Hitler turned west, defeating France and pushing Great Britain off the continent.

But he soon grew dissatisfied with attempts to reach an agreement with Moscow over apportioning spheres of influence, especially in the Balkans. Nor had he abandoned his belief that Germany needed *Lebensraum*, or “living space,” which could only be taken from the Soviet Union. Even though he had not defeated London, Hitler ordered plans for opening a second front by attacking his de facto ally of little more than a year.

Initially set for spring 1941, Operation Barbarossa was delayed by Berlin’s invasion of Yugoslavia after an anti-German coup in Belgrade. Historians debate whether or not those lost weeks were critical in Germany’s defeat, thwarting the capture of Moscow before the onset of winter. (There also is a lively debate, also unresolved, over whether or not Stalin was preparing to attack Germany, which Operation Barbarossa then fortuitously if unintentionally thwarted.)

Berlin won a series of extraordinary victories, but had seriously underestimated the strength and resilience of its foe. Hitler famously declared, “We have only to kick in the door, and the whole rotten structure will come crashing down.” German forces got within sight of Moscow but could not capture what was the political, industrial, and transportation heart of the Soviet Union. Whatever slim chances Berlin had to win after the conflict entered 1942 was lost with his foolish declaration of war against the U.S. after Pearl Harbor.

In a speech to the Reichstag on Thursday, December 11, 1941, Hitler complained, “As a consequence of the further extension of President Roosevelt’s policy, which is aimed at unrestricted world domination and dictatorship the U.S.A. together with England have not hesitated from using any means to dispute the rights of the German, Italian and Japanese nations to the basis of their natural existence.”

Moreover, reported Hitler (accurately, as it turns out), “Roosevelt’s ever-increasing attacks finally went so far that he ordered the American Navy to attack everywhere ships under the German and Italian flags, and to sink them — this in gross violation of international law.” In this sense, the two nations already were at war, and thus did Hitler make hostilities official. In doing

so, however, he allowed Roosevelt not only to take America into war against Germany, even though Japan had just attacked America, but also to make Europe Washington's priority.

Fighting only the Soviet Union and Great Britain, Germany had a chance of victory, but not with America added to the balance. It took time for the U.S. to add substantial military pressure. Most important in the early days was lend-lease, through which American industry armed the Red Army. Despite the mystique of the German blitzkrieg, characterized by dramatic armored thrusts, the *Heer*, or army, still relied on horses for much of its logistics. The U.S. mechanized the Red Army while providing tanks, trucks, combat and transport planes, infantry weapons, ammunition, locomotives and rail cars, clothing, industrial goods, food, and more. Indeed, Washington supplied roughly 93 percent of all Soviet railway equipment and a third of Soviet fighters, bombers, and trucks.

Although the Soviets could point to the fact that they faced roughly two-thirds of Germany's army and accounted for 80 percent of Germany's military deaths, American military aid multiplied the Red Army's combat effectiveness. Some Soviet historians admitted that lend-lease was critical for Moscow's victory. Even more significant, after his ouster Nikita Khrushchev discussed the issue in his memoirs:

*I would like to express my candid opinion about Stalin's views on whether the Red Army and the Soviet Union could have coped with Nazi Germany and survived the war without aid from the United States and Britain. First, I would like to tell about some remarks Stalin made and repeated several times when we were "discussing freely" among ourselves. He stated bluntly that if the United States had not helped us, we would not have won the war. If we had had to fight Nazi Germany one on one, we could not have stood up against Germany's pressure, and we would have lost the war.... When I listened to his remarks, I was fully in agreement with him, and today I am even more so.*

The Eastern Front, as it was known in Germany, remained in the balance through mid-1943. But after the mammoth tank battle of Kursk, the Wehrmacht was on the defensive. Germany's military collapse was accelerated by the D-Day landings on June 6, 1944. The Battle for Berlin, known officially as the "Berlin Strategic Offensive Operation" by the Soviets, commenced the following April. The fight was bitter and costly, but the outcome was preordained. Hitler committed suicide on April 30. The city's garrison surrendered on May 2. Germany formally yielded on May 8.

Another three months would lapse before Japan also surrendered. But it was Berlin that had most dramatically altered the global balance of power. Tokyo brought America into World War II, but against Japan alone the U.S. would have had a disproportionate maritime focus and remained outside the extraordinary German-Soviet contest for Eurasia. Japan's imperial depredations made the victory of Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party possible, but the revolutionaries took another four years to triumph. Even then, after decades of internal bloodletting, it took decades more before the People's Republic of China moved to center stage as an international power.

In contrast, the end of Hitler's war left a massively empowered Soviet Union in occupation of several nations in East and Central Europe as well as much of Germany. Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, along with what became East Germany, all ended up dominated if not entirely controlled by the Soviet Union. Yugoslavia and Albania also went

communist, though independent in the first case and crackpot in the second instance. Hitler's declaration of war pulled America back to the Old World and left the U.S. as Europe's guardian once the conflict there ended.

Moscow found that it wasn't easy to preserve this new communist empire. The Red Army had to crush revolts, oust reformers, and threaten invasions to keep the satellites in orbit. The *sogennant Deutsche Demokratische Republik*, or so-called German Democratic Republic, as East Germany was known in the West, had to rely on its Soviet garrison and even wall in its people. Another 44 years would pass before these nations were freed. This resulted from the happy confluence of a Soviet Communist Party general secretary with a humane core, who kept the Red Army in its barracks, and Ronald Reagan, who recognized that the USSR, as well as the world, had changed.

Yet neither of them would have had their dramatic roles to play if Germany had not been too clever by half — twice — first by weaponizing the man who turned out to be the greatest communist practitioner and gave us the Soviet Union, and second by invading that communist giant a couple decades after its birth and losing decisively.

As German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier noted in his commemoration last week of the anniversary of Operation Barbarossa, the invasion was “murderous barbarity.” Incredibly, that fight alone accounted for as many as 30 million deaths, half of them civilians. The conflict's aftermath was brutal as well, with the extension of communist control well into Europe.

Operation Barbarossa will forever stand as an example of human folly at its worst and most extreme. It should act as a profound lesson in the sort of political madness that we dare not repeat.

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