

Operation Barbarossa: Did Stalin Anticipate Hitler's Attack?

Part II

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*After the failed November 1940 discussions in Berlin, of the Soviet Union's foreign minister **Vyacheslav Molotov**, both he and his leader **Joseph Stalin** occasionally remarked that Nazi Germany was no longer so prompt in fulfilling its obligations to Moscow. This was relating to the German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact, of 23 August 1939, an agreement which was meant to last for 10 years. Stalin and Molotov did not attribute much significance to the slacking off in Berlin's punctuality, as the delivery of German goods and technology to Soviet Russia increasingly did not appear on schedule.*

Unknown to Stalin and Molotov, on the very day the Soviet foreign minister had landed in Berlin for talks, 12 November 1940, Adolf Hitler secretly issued Directive No. 18. It outlined the planned German invasion of the USSR, including the envisaged conquest of major cities like Kiev, Kharkov, Leningrad and Moscow. On 18 December 1940 Führer Directive No. 21 was completed, which stated that the Wehrmacht's attack on the Soviet Union should proceed in mid-May 1941.

For Russia, as 1941 advanced beyond its opening weeks, the warning signs about the German threat were becoming difficult to overlook. False reports were featured in the Nazi press about "military preparations" being made across the border in the Soviet camp. The same German media tactics had preceded Hitler's invasions of Czechoslovakia and Poland.

On 23 February 1941, the Soviet Defence Commissariat published a decree stating that Nazi Germany was the next likely enemy (1). Soviet frontier areas were requested to make the necessary preparations to repel the attack, but the Kremlin did not respond.

On 22 March 1941, the Russian intelligence agency NKGB obtained what it believed to be solid material that "Hitler has given secret instructions to suspend the fulfillment of orders for the Soviet Union", regarding shipments tied to the Nazi-Soviet Pact. For example the Czech Skoda plant, under Nazi control, had been ordered to halt deliveries to Russia. On 25 March 1941 the NKGB produced a special report, expounding that the Germans had amassed 120 divisions beside the Soviet border. (2)

For months there were concerning cables coming from the Russian military attaché in Nazi-occupied France, General Ivan Susloparov. The German authorities had curtailed Soviet embassy duties in France, and in February 1941 the Russian embassy was moved from Paris southwards to Vichy, in central France. Only a Soviet consulate was left in Paris.

Image on the right: [OKH](#) commander Field Marshal [Walther von Brauchitsch](#) and Hitler study maps during the early days of Hitler's Russian Campaign (Public Domain)



During April 1941, General Susloparov informed Moscow that the Germans would attack Russia in late May 1941. Slightly later on, he explained it had been delayed for a month due to bad weather. At the end of April, General Susloparov collected further information about the German invasion through colleagues from Yugoslavia, America, China, Turkey and Bulgaria (3). This intelligence was forwarded to Moscow by mid-May 1941.

Again in April 1941, a Czech agent reported that the Wehrmacht was going to execute military operations against the Soviet Union. The report was sent to Stalin, who became angry when he read it and replied, "This informant is an English provocateur. Find out who is making this provocation and punish him". (4)

On 10 April 1941 Stalin and Molotov were given a summary by the NKGB, about a meeting that Hitler had with Prince Paul of Yugoslavia at the Berghof, in early March 1941 (5). Hitler was described as telling Prince Paul he would begin his invasion of Russia in late June 1941. Stalin's response to the alarming reports, such as this, was one of appeasement of Hitler, though a similar strategy had failed for the Western powers.

Remarkably, through April 1941 Stalin increased the volume of shipments of Russian supplies to the Third Reich, amounting to: 208,000 tons of grain, 90,000 tons of oil, 6,340 tons of metal, etc (6). Much of these essentials would be used by the Nazis in their attack on Russia.

Marshal Filipp Golikov, head of intelligence for the USSR's General Staff, insisted that all Soviet reports relating to Nazi plans were forwarded directly to Stalin. Other accounts informing Moscow about an impending Wehrmacht invasion came from abroad too. As early as January 1941 Sumner Welles, an influential US government official, warned the Soviet Ambassador to America, Konstantin Umansky, that Washington had information showing

Germany would engage in war against Russia, by the spring of 1941. (7)

During the final week of March 1941 US Army cryptanalysts, experts at deciphering codes, started producing obvious indications of a German relocation to the east. This material was relayed to the Soviets (8). America's cryptographers had cracked Japanese codes in the second half of 1940; including the Purple Cipher, Japan's highest diplomatic code, which ensured that the Franklin Roosevelt government was uniquely well informed of Tokyo's intentions.

The US commercial attaché in Berlin, Sam E. Woods, came into contact with high-level German staff officers opposed to the Nazi regime. They were aware of the planning for Operation Barbarossa. Woods was in a position to discreetly observe the German preparations from July 1940, until December of that year. Woods sent his findings to Washington. President Roosevelt agreed that the Kremlin should be told of these developments. On 20 March 1941, Welles once more saw Soviet Ambassador Umansky and forwarded the news. (9)

Russia's embassy in Berlin noticed that the Nazi press was reprinting passages from Hitler's 1925 book 'Mein Kampf'. The paragraphs in question were about his proposal for "lebensraum", German enlargement at the Soviet Union's expense.

Image below: German troops at the Soviet state [border marker](#), 22 June 1941 (Public Domain)



The Russians had a formidable espionage agent, Richard Sorge, operating in Tokyo since 1933, the year that Hitler took power in Germany. Sorge, a German citizen and committed communist, established an especially close relationship with the imprudent Nazi ambassador to Japan, General Eugen Ott. The data Sorge received was not always 100% accurate, but it allowed him access to the most confidential and up to date German plans.

On 5 March 1941, Sorge dispatched to the Soviets a microfilm of a German telegram sent by the foreign minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, to the German ambassador Ott - and which outlined that the Wehrmacht attack on Russia would fall in mid-June 1941. On 15 May, Sorge reported to Moscow that the German invasion would start somewhere between 20 to 22 of

June (10). A few days later on 19 May Sorge cabled, "Against the Soviet Union will be concentrated nine armies, 150 divisions". He later increased this figure to between 170 to 190 divisions, and that Operation Barbarossa will start without an ultimatum or declaration of war.

All of this fell on deaf ears. Sorge, who had his vices being a heavy drinker and womaniser, was ridiculed by Stalin just before the Germans attacked as someone "who has set up factories and brothels in Japan". To be fair to Stalin, at the late date of 17 June 1941 Sorge was not fully certain if Barbarossa would go ahead (11). Why? The German military attaché in Tokyo became unsure if it would proceed, and sometimes a spy is only as good as his or her sources.

Meanwhile in March 1941, Russia's State Security forces acquired an account about a meeting the Romanian autocrat, Ion Antonescu, had with a German official named Bering, where the subject of war with Russia was discussed. Antonescu had in fact been informed by Hitler, as early as 14 January 1941, of the German plan to invade Russia, such was the prominent position Romania held in Nazi war aims. The German-controlled Ploesti refineries in southern Romania produced 5.5 million tons of oil in 1941, and 5.7 million tons in 1942. (12)

Italian dictator Benito Mussolini learnt of the German attack on Russia only after it had commenced - in part because Hitler believed he did not really need Italy, he had not asked for their help; and it was also hardly Italy's fight, considering that country's position cut adrift somewhat in south-central Europe. The Italian people, furthermore, would not want their troops involved in a brutal conflict against Russia, and which had nothing to do with Italy. The Duce had other ideas, and after the war the Austrian commando Otto Skorzeny correctly wrote, "Benito Mussolini was not a good wartime leader". (13)

By mid-March 1941, the Soviet leadership had a detailed description of the Barbarossa plan (14). The period, throughout March and early April 1941, saw tensions rise significantly between Berlin and Moscow, notably in south-eastern Europe. The American author Harrison E. Salisbury noted, "This was the moment in which Yugoslavia with tacit encouragement from Moscow defied the Germans, and in which the Germans moved rapidly and decisively to end the war in Greece, and occupy the whole of the Balkans. When Moscow signed a treaty with Yugoslavia on April 6 - the day Hitler attacked Belgrade - the German reaction was so savage that Stalin became alarmed". (15)

On 25 March 1941 the Yugoslav government of the regent, Prince Paul, had signed an agreement in Vienna, which effectively made Yugoslavia a Nazi client state. Nevertheless, just two days later patriotic factions in the Serbian populace, assisted by British agents and led by chief of the Yugoslav air force, General Dusan Simovic, overthrew the pro-German regency. They installed a monarchy headed by the teenage king, Peter II of Yugoslavia; and a new government was formed in the capital Belgrade which declared its neutrality. Upon hearing this, Winston Churchill declared it to be "great news" and that Yugoslavia had "found its soul" while it would receive from London "all possible aid and succour". (16)

Hitler was irate at Churchill's gloating and the sudden reversal in Yugoslav policy. Feeling he had been betrayed somehow, he decided to teach the Yugoslavs a lesson. Hitler ordered his Luftwaffe chief Hermann Göring to launch a furious air attack on Belgrade. In the days from 6 April 1941, thousands of people were killed in Belgrade from Nazi air raids. On the ground Yugoslav forces were no match for the Germans, who were helped by the Italians, and the

fighting was all over after less than two weeks. Churchill's aid and succour was sadly not forthcoming.

The Nazi-led Axis powers likewise invaded Greece on 6 April 1941, and by the middle of that month the Greek position had become untenable (17); therefore on 24 April British forces in Greece began their evacuation of the country. This was an operation the British had by now developed a real expertise in, as to escape the German blows they previously evacuated Dunkirk, Le Havre and Narvik.

Because of his subjugation of Yugoslavia and Greece, Hitler on 30 April 1941 postponed the attack on the Soviet Union until 22 June. It has sometimes been claimed that this delay, of just over five weeks, was a central factor in later derailing Barbarossa. Though an attractive one, this theory does not stand up under closer inspection.

The Nazi invasion eventually petered out, but largely due to strategic errors committed by the German high command and Hitler, such as not directing the majority of their forces towards Moscow, the USSR's communications centre. Moreover, Canadian historian Donald J. Goodspeed observed, "the middle of May was really too early for an invasion of Russia. Before the middle of June, late spring rains would ruin the roads, flood the rivers, and make movement very difficult except on the few paved highways. Thus, since the initial surprise thrust had to go rapidly to yield the best results, Hitler probably gained more than he lost by his postponement". (18)

The spring and early summer of 1941 were particularly wet, across eastern Poland and the western parts of European Russia. Had the Germans invaded as originally intended on 15 May 1941, their advance would have bogged down in the first weeks. It is interesting to note that the Polish-Russian river valleys were still overflowing on 1 June, according to the American historian Samuel W. Mitcham. (19)

On 3 April 1941 Churchill attempted to warn Stalin, through the British ambassador to Russia, Stafford Cripps, that London's intelligence data indicated the Germans were preparing an attack on Russia. Stalin gave no credence whatever to British intelligence reports, because he was distrustful of Britain even more so than America, and it is likely such warnings if anything increased his suspicions further.

In late April 1941 Jefferson Patterson, the First Secretary of the US Embassy in Berlin, invited his Russian counterpart Valentin Berezhkov to cocktails at his home. Among the invitees was a Luftwaffe major, apparently on leave from North Africa. Late in the evening this German major confided to Berezhkov, "The fact is I'm not here on leave. My squadron was recalled from North Africa, and yesterday we got orders to transfer to the east, to the region of Lodz [central Poland]. There may be nothing special in that, but I know many other units have also been transferred to your frontiers recently" (20). Berezhkov was disturbed to hear this, and never before had a Wehrmacht officer divulged top secret news like that. Berezhkov passed on what he heard to Moscow.

Throughout April 1941, daily bulletins from the Soviet General Staff and Naval Staff outlined German troop gatherings along the Russian frontier. On 1 May an account from the General Staff to the Soviet border military districts stated, "In the course of all March and April... the German command has carried out an accelerated transfer of troops to the borders of the Soviet Union". Try as the Germans might, it was impossible for them to conceal the gathering of vast numbers of their soldiers. The German presence was obvious along the

central River Bug boundary; the Soviet chief of frontier guards asked Moscow for approval to relocate the families of Red Army troops further east. Permission was not granted and the commander was upbraided for showing “panic”. (21)

Nazi reconnaissance flights, near or over Soviet territory, were increasing as the spring of 1941 continued. Between 28 March and 18 April, the Russians said that German planes had been sighted 80 times making incursions. On 15 April, a German aircraft was forced into an emergency landing near the city of Rovno, in western Ukraine. On board a camera was found, along with exposed film and a map of the USSR (22). The German chargé d'affaires in Moscow, Werner von Tippelskirch, was summoned to the Foreign Commissariat on 22 April 1941. He met stiff protestations about the German overflights.

Yet Nazi planes were hardly ever shot at, because Stalin forbade the Soviet armed forces from doing so, for fear of provoking an invasion. In early May 1941 the German propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels wrote in his diary, “Stalin and his people remain completely inactive. Like a rabbit confronted by a snake”. (23)

On 5 May 1941 Stalin received from his intelligence agencies a report detailing, “German officers and soldiers speak openly of the coming war, between Germany and the Soviet Union, as a matter already decided. The war is expected to start after the completion of spring planting”. Also on 5 May Stalin gave a speech to young Soviet officers at the Kremlin, and he spoke seriously of the Nazi threat. “War with Germany is inevitable” Stalin said, but there is no sign the Soviet ruler believed a German attack was imminent. (24)

On 24 May 1941, the head of the German western press department, Karl Bemer, got drunk at a reception in the Bulgarian embassy in Berlin. Bemer was heard roaring “we will be boss of all Russia and Stalin will be dead. We will demolish the Russians quicker than we did the French” (25). This incident quickly came to the attention of Ivan Filippov, a Russian correspondent in Berlin working for the TASS news agency. Filippov, also a Soviet intelligence operative, heard that Bemer was thereafter arrested by German police.

In early June 1941 Admiral Mikhail Vorontsov, the Russian naval attaché in Berlin, telegraphed his fellow Admiral Nikolai Kuznetsov, who was in Moscow, and stated that the Germans would invade around the 20th to the 22nd of June. Kuznetsov checked to see if Stalin was given a copy of this telegram, and he found that he certainly received it. (26)

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Notes

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Featured image: Elements of the German [3rd Panzer Army](#) on the road near [Pruzhaný](#), June 1941 (Public Domain)

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