

# History of World War II: How “General Winter” Did Not Save the Soviet Union in 1941

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*The Second World War started, at least as far as its “European theatre” was concerned, with the German army steamrolling over Poland in September 1939. About six months later, even more spectacular victories followed, this time over the Low Countries and France. Great Britain refused to throw in the towel but could not threaten a Nazi Reich that looked invincible and predestined to rule the European continent indefinitely. Hitler was thus able to turn his attention to the project that he considered the great mission entrusted to him by providence, namely the destruction of the Soviet Union, the cradle and hotbed of communism, a country he liked to refer to as “Russia ruled by Jews”.*

Hitler not only ardently wanted to attack the Soviet Union but felt that he had to do so as soon as possible. Germany was a major industrial power, but underprivileged in terms of access to essential raw materials. Its defeat in World War I, when the Reich was blockaded by the Royal Navy, had demonstrated that without a steady supply of essential strategic raw materials, particularly petroleum and rubber, Germany could not win a long, drawn-out war. This is how the blitzkrieg concept was born, a strategy that called for synchronised attacks by waves of tanks and airplanes to pierce the defensive lines. Deep penetration into hostile territory, followed quickly by infantry units moving not on foot or by train, as in the Great War, but in trucks; and then swinging back to bottle up and liquidate entire enemy armies in gigantic “encirclement battles” (*Kesselschlachten*).

The blitzkrieg strategy worked perfectly in 1939 and 1940, when it enabled the Wehrmacht and Luftwaffe to overwhelm the Polish, Dutch, Belgian, and French defenses. *Blitzkriege*,

“lightning-fast wars” were invariably followed by *Blitzsieg*, “lightning-fast victories.” However, these victories did not provide Germany with much loot in the form of vitally important petroleum and rubber; instead, they depleted the stockpiles built up before the war. Fortunately for Hitler, in 1940 and 1941 Germany was able to continue importing oil from Romania and the still neutral United States. Under the terms of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, concluded in August 1939, the Soviet Union itself also supplied Germany with petroleum, but these deliveries represented merely four per cent of all German oil imports at that time. (Millman, pp. 273, 261-83) And in return, Germany had to deliver high-quality industrial products and state-of-the-art military technology.

The Soviets used this equipment to improve their weaponry in preparation for a German attack they expected to come sooner or later (Soete, pp. 289-90). Hitler found this most troubling, since it made the Soviets defenses stronger by the day. Time was obviously not on Hitler’s side, so he feared that the “window of opportunity” for an easy victory in the east might soon close. Finally, the sooner the Soviet Union would be conquered, the better for Germany, which would then finally be blessed with virtually limitless resources, including the rich Caucasian oil fields.

(The German dictator turned his attention to his anti-Soviet project virtually immediately after the defeat of France, that is, in the summer of 1940. Preparations started after he gave an order to that effect on July 31. On December 18 of that year, the project for an *Ostkrieg* or “eastern war” received the code-name Operation Barbarossa. Kershaw, p. 14; Ueberschär, p. 39).

The attack started on June 22, 1941, in the early hours of the morning. Three million German soldiers plus almost 700,000 allies of Nazi Germany poured across the border. Huge holes were punched in the Soviet defences, impressive territorial gains were rapidly made and hundreds of thousands of Red Army soldiers were killed, wounded, or taken prisoner.

According to Western mainstream historiography, reflected in media articles and documentaries, the Nazi host would undoubtedly have marched all the way to Moscow and defeated the Soviet Union, had they not been prevented by doing so by the intervention of General Winter, a.k.a. “General Frost.” Presumably, an unusually early arrival of equally unusually cold weather ruined the plans of the German generals, who had failed to equip their troops with winter gear, and robbed Hitler of a virtually certain victory. In other words, Barbarossa failed because of a force majeure, because of “bad luck” for the Germans and “good luck” for the Soviets. The historical truth, however, is very different. The advance of what was then the world’s mightiest army was halted, admittedly at the cost of huge losses, not by General Winter but by the efforts and sacrifices of the Soviet people, civilians as well as soldiers. Let us take a closer look at the facts.

Hitler and his generals were convinced that their “lightning warfare” would be as successful against the Soviets as it had been against Poland, France, etc. They considered the Soviet Union to be a “giant with feet of clay,” whose army, presumably decapitated by Stalin’s purges of the late 1930s, was “not more than a joke,” as Hitler himself put it on one occasion (Ueberschär, p. 95). To win a decisive victory, they allowed six to eight weeks; by the end of August, at the latest, it would be “game over” for the Red Army, so the bulk of the German soldiers would be able to return to their jobs in Germany.

Hitler felt supremely confident, and on the eve of the attack, he “fancied himself to be on the verge of the greatest triumph of his life.” (Müller, pp. 209, 225) In Washington and

London, the military experts allowed for a little more time, they believed that the Soviet Union would be “liquidated within eight to ten weeks”; even so, it was predicted that the Wehrmacht would slice through the Red Army “like a warm knife through butter” and that the Soviet soldiers would be rounded up “like cattle.” According to expert opinion in Washington, Hitler would “crush Russia [sic] like an egg.” (Pauwels 2015, p. 66; Losurdo, p. 29)

At first, everything went according to plan: the road to Moscow seemed to lay open, another deadly blitzkrieg appeared destined to produce another brilliant *Blitzsieg*. However, it became evident within days that the campaign would not be the cakewalk that had been expected. Propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels confided in his diary as early as July 2 that the Soviets suffered heavy losses but also put up a tough resistance and hit back very hard. General Franz Halder, in many ways the “godfather” of the plan of attack, acknowledged that Soviet resistance was much stronger than anything they had faced in Western Europe. Wehrmacht reports cited “hard,” “tough,” even “wild” resistance, causing heavy losses in men and equipment on the German side. Many if not most of the German victories in the early stages of Barbarossa belonged to the Pyrrhic category, so much so, that the soldiers started to react to triumphant communiqués with the sarcastic comment that they were “‘victoring’ themselves to death.” (The German term they used was *totsiegen*) (Overy, p. 87; Kershaw, pp. 237, 362, 377, 575-77, 581)

More often than expected, Soviet forces managed to launch counterattacks that slowed down the German advance. Some Soviet units went into hiding in the vast Pripet Marshes and elsewhere and organized deadly partisan warfare for which thorough preparations had been made in advance, and this guerilla-style warfare thoroughly perturbed the long and vulnerable German lines of communication. (Ueberschär, pp. 97-98)

The Red Army suffered huge losses but proved able to persevere because it turned out to be much bigger than anticipated, counting about 360 divisions, rather than the 300 estimated by the Germans. It also turned out that the Soviets were much better equipped than expected. The Wehrmacht generals were “amazed,” writes a German historian, by the quality of Soviet weapons such as the Katyusha rocket launcher (a.k.a. “Stalin Organ”) and the T-34 tank. Hitler was furious that his secret services had not been aware of the existence of some of this weaponry. (Ueberschär, p. 97; Kershaw, pp. 173-79, 573; Losurdo, p. 31)

The greatest cause of concern for the Germans was the fact that the bulk of the Red Army managed to withdraw in relatively good order and eluded encirclement and destruction, avoiding a repeat of Cannae or Sedan, which Hitler and his generals had dreamt of. The Soviets appeared to have carefully observed and analyzed the German blitzkrieg successes of 1939 and 1940 and to have learned useful lessons. They must have noticed that in May 1940 the French had massed their forces right at the border as well as in Belgium, thus making it possible for the German war machine to bottle them up. (British troops were also caught in this encirclement but managed to escape via Dunkirk.) The Soviets did leave some troops at the border, of course, and these units predictably suffered the Soviet Union’s major losses during the opening stages of Barbarossa. But — contrary to what is claimed by historians such as Richard Overy (Overy, pp. 64-65) — the bulk of the Red Army was held back in the rear, avoiding entrapment. It was this “defence in depth” that frustrated the German ambition to destroy the Red Army in its entirety. As Marshal Zhukov was to write in his memoirs, “the Soviet Union would have been smashed if we had organized all our forces at the border.” (Losurdo, p. 33; Soete, p. 297)

By the middle of July, some German leaders started to voice great concern. Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, head of the Wehrmacht's secret service, the Abwehr, for example, confided on July 17 to a colleague on the front, General von Bock, that he saw "nothing but black." On the home front, many German civilians also started to feel that the war in the east was not going well. In fact, unease and concern gradually gave way to pessimism and depression as "the daily papers carried endless columns of death notices." (Kershaw, pp. 394-96) In Dresden, Victor Klemperer, a Jewish linguist who kept a diary, wrote on July 13 that "we [the Germans] suffer immense losses, we have underestimated the Russians." (Losurdo, pp. 31-32)

The Germans did indeed suffer "immense losses" during their invasion of the Soviet Union and did so from the start. Within three weeks, the German casualties in the Soviet Union exceeded those of the entire campaign in France in 1940. Before the end of September, they had suffered half a million casualties, the equivalent of 30 divisions. (Kershaw, pp. 377, 577) Between June 22, 1941, and January 31, 1942, material losses would include 6,000 airplanes and more than 3,200 tanks and similar vehicles. And during the same period no less than 918,000 men would be killed, wounded, or gone missing in action, amounting to almost one third — 28.7 per cent, to be precise — of an army of just over 3 million men. (Ueberschär, p. 116)

Less than one month after the start of Barbarossa, the notion that things were not going well on what was to become known as the eastern front was thus already spreading in Germany from the top of the military and political hierarchy to the lowest civilian levels. Worse, already on July 9, generals of Marshal Pétain's French collaborator regime, meeting in Vichy, received confidential reports that the Wehrmacht was unlikely to defeat the Soviets within two months, as planned. The French generals concluded that a German victory, not only in the Soviet Union but in the war in general no longer belonged to the realm of possibilities. One of them even opined that "Germany would not win the war but had already lost it." (Lacroix-Riz 2016, pp. 245-46)

Need it be pointed out that these bad tidings date back to the middle of the summer of 1941, not even one month after the start of Barbarossa and long before — according to conventional Western historiography — General Winter would appear on the scene to save the skin of the Soviet bear?

Western historiography tends to focus on the Wehrmacht's spectacular advances and victories in the opening stages of Operation Barbarossa, while ignoring or minimizing its losses; conversely, the Soviet losses receive plenty of attention, while any Soviet successes tend to be ignored or downplayed. Even though the Wehrmacht's performance did indeed appear to be very impressive, Hitler's blitzkrieg in the east started to lose its *blitz* qualities after only a few weeks. Robert Kershaw, a specialist in the German-Soviet war, has described how "Blitzkrieg momentum petered out" as early as the first week of July, "the tempo faltered" in the following weeks, and the vanguards ceased "sprinting as they had done in the Polish and French campaigns." (Kershaw, pp. 236, 253) Eventually, as an Italian historian, comparing Hitler's and Napoleon's ventures in Russia, has observed, "despite the fast dashes of the panzers, the average speed of the German army ended up being not much higher than that of Napoleon's troops [in 1812]." (Sansone)

In that same summer of 1941, then, Hitler himself had to abandon his dream of a quick and easy victory and scale down his expectations. He now expressed the hope that his troops might reach the Volga by October and capture the oil fields of the Caucasus a month or so

later. (Wegner, p. 653) By the end of August, at a time when Barbarossa should have been winding down, a memorandum of the Wehrmacht's High Command (*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*, OKW) acknowledged that it might no longer be possible to win the war in 1941. (Ueberschär, p. 100) Having to keep millions of men in uniform in the eastern killing fields conjured up the spectre of labor shortages that might cripple the German economy, thus further diminishing the Reich's prospects for victory.

Another major problem was the fact that, when Barbarossa started on June 22, the available supplies of fuel, tires, spare parts, and the like were expected to last for not much more than two months. This had been deemed sufficient because it would supposedly take no more than eight weeks to bring the Soviet Union to its knees, and then that country's virtually unlimited resources — agricultural and industrial products as well as oil and other raw materials — would be available to the victorious Germans. (Müller, p. 233) However, by late August 1941 the Wehrmacht's spearheads were nowhere near those distant stretches of the Soviet Union where petroleum, that most precious of all martial commodities, was to be had. If the tanks managed to keep on rolling, though increasingly slowly, into the seemingly endless Ukrainian and Russian expanses, it was to a large extent by means of fuel, imported via neutral Spain and occupied France, from the US. In any event, by the end of August, at the latest, shortage of fuel and spare parts were becoming a major problem. That had a nefarious impact on the morale of the troops, who realized that "the enemy possessed unimaginable huge reserves in men and material." It was hardly comforting that the diminishing supply of fuel was offset to some extent by diminishing demand, caused by the fact that no less than 30% of the panzers had been destroyed by the end of August. (Jersak; Pauwels 2015, pp. 78-79; Kershaw, pp. 366, 372-73, 375)

The flames of optimism briefly shot up again in September, when German troops captured Kiev and, further north, made progress in the direction of Moscow. Hitler believed, or at least pretended to believe, that the end was now near for the Soviets. In a public speech in the Berlin Sportpalast on October 3, he declared that the *Ostkrieg* was virtually over. But his bluster could not conceal the nasty reality of developments at the front. In September, when a blitzkrieg victory was already supposed to be in the bag, a correspondent of the *New York Times* based in Stockholm became convinced that the opposite result was more likely. He had just returned from a visit to the Reich, where he witnessed the arrival of trainloads of injured soldiers, causing him to conclude that "the collapse of Germany could come with dramatic suddenness." The always well-informed Vatican, initially very enthusiastic about Hitler's "crusade" against the Soviet homeland of "godless" Bolshevism, had already become very concerned about the situation in the east in late summer 1941; by mid-October, it concluded that Germany would lose the war. (Lacroix-Riz 1996, p. 417; Baker, p. 387) (Clearly, the German bishops had not been informed of the bad tidings since a couple of months later on December 10 they publicly declared to be "observing the struggle against Bolshevism with satisfaction.") Likewise in mid-October, the Swiss secret services reported that "the Germans could no longer win the war." (Bourgeois, pp. 123, 127.) Even at that time, when an ominous writing was clearly visible on the Wehrmacht's wall, General Winter still had not made his appearance in the Soviet Union.

Hitler did not give up. Having convinced himself that the Soviets were already defeated but did not yet realize it, he ordered the Wehrmacht to deliver the coup de grâce by launching Operation Typhoon (*Unternehmen Taifun*), a drive aimed at taking Moscow, the Soviet capital that was supposed to have fallen months earlier. But the odds for success looked very slim, as Red Army units were being brought in from the Far East to bolster the city's



defenses. Moscow had been informed by its master spy in Tokyo, Richard Sorge, that the Japanese, whose army was stationed in northern China, were no longer considering attacking the Soviets' vulnerable borders in the Vladivostok area. (Hasegawa, p. 17) (Tokyo had been antagonized by Hitler's conclusion of a pact with Stalin in 1939 and had switched to a "southern strategy" that was to bring them into conflict with the US.) (Pauwels 2021)

To make things worse for the German side, the Luftwaffe no longer enjoyed superiority in the air, particularly over Moscow. Moreover, sufficient supplies of ammunition and food could not be brought up from the rear to the front since the stretched-out supply lines were severely hampered by partisan activity. (Ueberschär, pp. 99-102, 106-7)

It was now getting chilly in the Soviet Union, though probably no colder than usual at that time of the year. The German high command, confident that their eastern blitzkrieg would be over by the end of the summer, had not deemed it necessary to supply the troops with the equipment necessary to fight in the rain, mud, snow and freezing temperatures of a Russian fall and winter. On the other hand, the onset of winter conditions around the middle of November may be said to have favoured the Germans; Thanks to freezing but still "moderate" temperatures, the ground froze in November 1941, making it much easier for the panzers and other vehicles to advance along frozen roads and across open terrain than before, during the fall's "rasputitsa" season with its frequent rains and ubiquitous mud. (Egorov)



German soldiers pulling an automobile through the mud during the 1941 rasputitsa (CC BY-SA 3.0 de)

Taking Moscow loomed as an extremely important objective in the minds of Hitler and his generals. It was believed, though probably wrongly, that the fall of its capital would "decapitate" the Soviet Union and thus bring about the country's collapse. It also seemed important to avoid a repeat of the scenario of the summer of 1914, when the seemingly unstoppable German advance into France had been halted in extremis on the eastern outskirts of Paris, during the Battle of the Marne. This disaster — from the German perspective — had robbed Germany of nearly certain victory in the opening stages of the Great War and had forced it into a lengthy struggle that, lacking sufficient resources and

blockaded by the British navy, it was doomed to lose. This time, in a new Great War fought against a new archenemy, there was to be no new “miracle of the Marne,” that is, no faltering just outside the enemy capital. It was imperative that Germany not find itself resourceless and blockaded in a long, drawn-out conflict it was certain to lose. Unlike Paris, Moscow would fall, history would not repeat itself, and Germany would end up being victorious. Or so they hoped in Hitler’s headquarters.

The Wehrmacht continued to advance, albeit slowly, and by mid-November some units found themselves only thirty kilometres from the capital; some patrols reportedly even penetrated the suburb of Khimki, situated at only 20 km from the Kremlin. However, the troops were now totally exhausted and running out of supplies. Their commanders knew that it was simply impossible to take Moscow, tantalizingly close as the city may have been, and that even doing so would not bring them victory. A defeatism of sorts had started to infect the higher ranks of the Wehrmacht and of the Nazi party. Even as they were urging their troops forward towards Moscow, some generals opined that it would be preferable to make peace overtures and wind down the war without achieving the great victory that had seemed so certain at the start of Operation Barbarossa. Shortly before the end of November, armament Minister Fritz Todt asked Hitler to search for a diplomatic way out of the war, since purely militarily as well as industrially it was as good as lost. (Ueberschär, pp. 107-8)

It is in this context that, on December 3, several Wehrmacht units abandoned the offensive on their own initiative. But within days, the entire German army in front of Moscow moved on the defensive involuntarily. Indeed, on December 5, at three in the morning, in cold and snowy conditions, the Red Army launched a major counterattack that had been well prepared and dissimulated under the auspices of General Zhukov. (Kershaw, pp. 513-14) The Wehrmacht was caught by surprise, its lines were pierced in many places, and over the following days the Germans were thrown back between 100 and 280 kilometres with heavy losses of men and equipment. It was the first time ever that the Wehrmacht had to organize a major withdrawal, and there were no plans for such an operation; it was only with great difficulty that a catastrophic encirclement was avoided and that a defensive line could be established. On December 8, Hitler formally ordered his army to abandon the offensive and move into defensive positions. (Ueberschär, pp. 107-11; Roberts, p. 111)



Which way back to Berlin? German soldiers west of Moscow, December 1941 (CC BY 3.0)

The Germans thus managed to survive the Soviet counter-offensive, which would run out of steam in early January 1942. Hitler ignored his generals' advice to seek a diplomatic exit of the war and decided to battle on in the slim hope of somehow pulling victory out of a hat. In the spring of 1942, he would scrape together all available forces for an offensive in the direction of the Caucasus, whose petroleum Germany desperately needed. After initial successes, that effort was to result in the catastrophic defeat at Stalingrad, which was to reveal to the entire world that Germany was doomed. But let us stay in 1941. Hoping – in vain, as it turned out – that Tokyo would reciprocate with a declaration of war on the Soviet Union, which would have forced the Red Army to fight on two fronts, Hitler also gratuitously declared war on the US a few days after he received the news of Pearl Harbor, but that is a different story. (See Pauwels 2015, pp. 79-85)

Hitler and his generals had believed, not without reason, that to win the war, Germany had to win it fast. The realization, or at least fear, that a “lightning-fast victory” would not be forthcoming had already dawned on many of the Führer's military and Nazi party associates for months, starting in July. Hitler himself seems to have refused to acknowledge this reality until December 5, when the Red Army launched its counter-offensive early in the morning. On that day, his generals came to the “Führer's headquarters” and made it clear that he could no longer win the war. (Hillgruber, p. 81.) As we have seen, the blitzkrieg strategy had been moribund virtually from the moment it had been implemented against the Soviet Union the previous June 22, and its agony has lasted for many months, but December 5 may be viewed as the day that its death was certified. And it is therefore not unreasonable to declare December 5, 1941 to be “major break [Zäsur] of the entire world war,” in other words, the turning point, at least symbolically, of the Second World War II, as Gerd R. Ueberschär, a German expert on the war against the Soviet Union, has done. (Ueberschär, p. 120). However, the importance of December 5 was far from evident to most people in Germany, the Soviet Union, and the rest of the world; it was only much later, in early 1943, after its catastrophic defeat in the Battle of Stalingrad, that the entire world would realize



that Nazi Germany's bubble had burst.

A sine qua non for a Germany victory not only in the war against the Soviet Union but in the entire war, was that the blitzkrieg in the east would be over within maximum eight weeks, that is, long before the first snowflakes started coming down. However, in a Herculean effort and at the price of unseen sacrifices, the Soviets downgraded Hitler's "lightning war" to a crawl as early as the summer of 1941, caused it to lose more of its blitz throughout the fall, long after it was supposed to have been concluded victoriously, and finally liquidated it in early December, thus ruining Hitler's prospects for victory. It was only at that eleventh hour, in late November-early December, that General Winter made an appearance. This ice-cold epiphany undoubtedly inflicted yet another torment on the already exhausted and demoralized German troopers at the front. However, the arrival of General Winter was most welcome to the Nazis as it provided them with a rationale for the failure of a blitzkrieg that had been moribund since the summer and was now finally laid to rest.

The myth crediting General Winter may be said to have been concocted by none other than Hitler himself. In the days following that fateful December 5, he explained the fiasco of Barbarossa as a temporary setback caused by the supposedly early arrival of winter, in other words, as a kind of "act of God." Nazi spin doctors subsequently disseminated this myth throughout Germany, occupied Europe, and the rest of the world. One could hardly expect the Nazis to tell the truth, that is, to admit that they had been beaten, "fairly and squarely," as the saying goes, by their mortal enemies, the Soviet communists. Something similar can be said about the situation after 1945, when, in the context of the Cold War, the Nazi myth was recycled in the West to minimize the Soviet contribution to the defeat of Nazi Germany. After the fall of the Soviet Union the myth has continued to be useful for anti-Russian purposes.

The Nazi invaders were defeated by the Red Army, which proved to be much stronger, better equipped, and much more motivated than the overconfident aggressors had expected. As Robert Kershaw, the author of a thorough history of the *Ostkrieg* has put it, "'General Winter' was not responsible [for the German defeat], . . . the ferocity and doggedness of Russian resistance [was]." (Kershaw, p. 577)



The Red Army deserved this recognition, but the Soviet success would not have been possible without the support of the majority of the Russian and many other peoples that made up the Soviet nation, except, of course, a not inconsiderable number of collaborators. Of the latter, every country facing the Reich unfortunately had its fair share. The Germans wrongly believed that the Soviet Union would be full of them, so that they would be welcomed with open arms as liberators, but the opposite proved to be the case: they faced widespread resistance, including armed resistance by partisans. It is fair to say that without such massive popular support, the Soviet Union would not have survived the Nazi onslaught.

How about the role of the Soviet leaders, political as well as military? That they also deserve some credit, has been acknowledged in the Western world, at least in the case of a handful of military leaders like Zhukov, the defender of Moscow, who has been lionized almost, but not quite, as much as “Anglo-American” generals such as Eisenhower and Montgomery and even Nazi commanders like Guderian and Rommel. But while the West’s political leaders have likewise been glorified, for example Churchill and Roosevelt, their Soviet counterparts are typically dismissed as criminally incompetent, with Stalin in the role of *bête noire*. This necessitates explaining the Soviet success as the result of a force majeure such as the hypothetical, *deus en machina*-like intervention of General Winter and/or massive material aid received from Uncle Sam. The latter argument does not make sense for many reasons. May it suffice here and now to point out that in 1941, when they ruined the blitzkrieg and turned the tide of war, *nota bene* even before the US entered the war, the Soviets received no American material assistance whatsoever; on the other hand, throughout that same year, American corporations and oil trusts were supplying the Nazis –via production in branch plants in Germany and exports via neutral third countries — with a lot of the trucks, planes and other equipment as well as plenty of the fuel required to wage their blitzkrieg in the east. (Pauwels 2015, pp. 78-79) In light of this, the notion that US aid helped the Soviet Union to survive Barbarossa comes close to being laughable.

While the Soviet political leadership – usually referred to in the West as “Stalin” –made numerous mistakes big and small, just like all other governments at the time, it did a lot to make it possible for the Soviet Union to survive the Nazi onslaught and ultimately to defeat the Nazi monster. Let us briefly focus on three achievements, inevitably totally misrepresented in the Western world. First, the conclusion of a pact with Nazi Germany in August 1939. Via that agreement, the Soviets gained vitally important time and space: time to improve their defences and move vital industries far into the interior; and space in the form of so-called “Eastern Poland”, in reality former Russian territory annexed by Poland; the “starting blocks” of a German attack were thus moved hundreds of kilometres to the west, away from Moscow and other important centres of the Soviet Union. Without the benefit of this “glacis”, the Soviet capital would almost certainly have fallen to the German invaders in 1941. (Pauwels 2021)

Second, in the late thirties, the Soviet authorities discovered a major conspiracy aimed at sabotaging the country’s defense in case of a Nazi attack. This treasonous cabal involved high-ranking Red Army commanders, many of whom had formerly served the czarist army, such as Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky, of whom it is now known with certainty that they worked together with the Nazi secret services for the purpose of facilitating a German attack. This episode is typically but wrongly portrayed in the West as a Macchiavellian scheme orchestrated by Stalin, who allegedly sought to eliminate potential competitors who were innocent of any wrongdoing; and this implied a “decapitation” of the Red Army that

supposedly helps to explain its poor performance in the early stages of Barbarossa.

However, if this “fifth column” in the Soviet Union had not been eliminated, the Red Army would undoubtedly have done much worse in June 1941 than it actually did; it would probably have experienced a “strange defeat” like the one suffered one year earlier, in May-June 1940, by the French army, which was teeming with generals sympathetic to the Nazis. (Lacroix-Riz 2006) The elimination of the Soviet counterparts of the treacherous French generals was regretted, of course, by all those who wished for the demise of the Soviet Union at the time. That included the Nazi leaders, of course, who had hoped that the conspiracy would succeed and were very disappointed when it was discovered. In October 1943, Heinrich Himmler, the head of the SS, which was deeply involved in the war (and war crimes) in the Soviet Union, stated in a speech that he believed “that Russia would never have lasted through these two years of war . . . if she had retained the former czarist generals.” (Furr, p. 146)

But less unsympathetic folks understood perfectly well why the leadership in Moscow had eliminated an all too real “fifth column.” Albert Einstein thus wrote to a friend that “the Russians had no choice but to destroy as many of their enemies within their own camp as possible.” (“Thesis: Einstein, H. G. Wells, and Other Leading Figures...”)

Third, during the time gained by the conclusion of the 1939 Pact, the Soviet government managed to transfer untold important factories from areas near the western border to the interior of the country, even to the far side of the Urals. That would prove to be crucially important in 1941, since it made it possible to continue producing all sorts of weapons and other strategic equipment while denying it to the German invaders. With respect to the latter objective, the government’s “scorched earth” policy also proved helpful.

Incidentally, moving a huge part of a country’s industry in little more than two years would have been impossible had the Soviet economy been capitalist, that is, based on private ownership. This and similar considerations have led an American expert in the field, Sanford R. Lieberman, to state unequivocally that it is unlikely that the Soviet Union would have weathered the Nazi storm if its system had not been the one produced by Russian Revolution auspices, that is, a communist one. (Lieberman, p. 71) It is understandable that, in the context of the Cold War, mainstream historians and other social scientists were not keen so subscribe to the idea that the Soviet Union owed its survival in 1941 to a considerable extent to the communist socio-economic system (and the country’s communist leaders) and therefore worked hard to promote the anti-Soviet and anticommunist notion that the land of the Soviets had survived not because but in spite of it (and them), namely, on account of an incredible stroke of luck in the form of an intervention by General Winter – plus some unselfish aid from Uncle Sam.

Had the blitzkrieg worked its magic in the Soviet Union in 1941, Nazi Germany would have conquered the Soviet Union, a cornucopia of strategic resources such as petroleum, and become an invulnerable Behemoth certain to remain the master of Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals, and probably the Middle East and North Africa as well. There would have been no Stalingrad, no landings in Normandy, no Hitler suicide in the ruins of conquered Berlin. That the nasty scenario of a Nazi “final triumph” (*Endsieg*) failed to unfold, is something for which we must thank not General Winter but the Red Army, the Soviet people, and the Soviet government. Spassiba!

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