

World War II *

World War II began in the Far East where Japan, having invaded China in 1931, became involved in full-scale hostilities in 1937. In Europe the German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, brought Britain and France into the war two days later. Italy declared war on Britain on June 10, 1940, shortly before the French surrender on June 21. Having defeated France but not Britain, Germany attacked the Soviet Union a year later on June 22, 1941. Then the Japanese attacked United States naval forces in Hawaii on December 7, 1941, and British colonies in Hong Kong and Malaya the following day. The subsequent German and Italian declarations of war on the United States completed the line-up: Germany, Italy, and Japan, the "Axis" powers of the Anti-Comintern Treaty of 1936, against the Allies: the United States of America, the British Empire and Dominions, and the Soviet Union. Only the Soviet Union and Japan remained at peace with each other until the Soviet declaration of war on August 8, 1945, two days after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima.

The pattern of the war resembles a tidal flow. Until the end of 1942 the armies and navies of the Axis continually extended their power through Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Pacific. Towards the end of 1942 the tide turned. The Allies won decisive victories in each theatre: the Americans over the Japanese fleet at Midway and over the Japanese army on the island of Guadalcanal; the British over the German army in North Africa at el Alamein; and the Soviet army over the German army at Stalingrad. From 1943 onwards the tide reversed and the powers of the Axis shrank continually. Italy surrendered to an Anglo-American invasion on September 3, 1943, Germany to the Anglo-American forces on May 7, 1945, and to the Red Army the following day; and Japan to the Americans on September 7, 1945. The war was over.

BACKGROUND TO THE WAR

Why did the Soviet Union become entangled in this war? German preparations for an invasion of the Soviet Union began the previous year, following the French surrender, for three reasons. First, the German leader Adolf Hitler believed that the presence of the Red Army in his rear was the main reason that Britain, isolated since the fall of France, had not come to terms. He expected that a knock-out blow in the east would finish the war in the west. Second, if the war in the west continued Hitler believed that Britain would use its naval superiority to blockade Germany; he planned to ensure Germany's food and oil supplies by means of overland expansion to the east. Third, Hitler had become entangled in the west only because of his aggression against Poland, but Poland was also a means to an end: a gateway to the Ukraine and Russia where he sought Germany's "living space". Thus,

* This entry appeared in *The Encyclopedia of Russian History*, 4 vols. James R. Millar, ed. New York: Macmillan Reference, 2003.

an immediate attack on the Soviet Union promised to overcome all the obstacles barring his way in foreign affairs.

At the same time the Soviet Union was not a passive victim of the war. Soviet preparations for a coming war began in the 1920s. They were stepped up following the “war scare” of 1927, which strengthened Josef Stalin’s determination to accelerate military and industrial modernization. At this stage Soviet leaders understood that an immediate war was unlikely. They did not fear Germany, which was still a democracy and a relatively friendly power, but Poland, Finland, France, or Japan. They feared for the relatively distant future, and this is one reason why Soviet rearmament, although determined, was slow at first; they understood that the first task was to build its industrial base.

In the early 1930s Stalin became sharply aware of new real threats from Japan under military rule in the far east and Germany under the Nazis in the west. In the years that followed he gave growing economic priority to the needs of external security. However, he failed to juggle the external threat with the danger represented by the enemy within. For much of the decade Stalin was much more concerned with domestic threats; he believed his external opponents to be working against him by plotting secretly with his internal enemies rather than openly by conventional military and diplomatic means. In 1937/38 he directed a savage purge of the Red Army general staff and officer corps that gravely weakened the armed forces in which he was simultaneously investing billions of rubles. The same purges damaged his own credibility on the world stage; as a result those countries with which he shared common interests became less likely to see him as a worthy ally, and his external enemies became more likely to attack him. Stalin therefore approached World War II with several deadly enemies and few friends in foreign capitals, and with an army that was increasingly numerous and well equipped but morally broken.

Things with Japan and Germany worked out differently. Japan first: from their base in north China in May 1939 the Japanese armed forces began a series of probing border attacks on the Soviet Union that culminated in August in fierce fighting and a decisive victory for the Red Army at Khalkin-Gol (Nomonhan). After that, deterred from encroaching further on Soviet territory, the Japanese shifted their attention to the softer targets represented by British and Dutch colonial possessions in southeast Asia. In April 1941 the USSR and Japan concluded a treaty of neutrality that lasted until August 1945; it lasted because, while Japan was fighting America and the Soviet Union was fighting Germany, neither wanted war on a second front.

In contrast to Japan, Germany was too near and too powerful for the Soviet Union to be able to deter Hitler single-handed. Stalin’s difficulty was that he lacked willing partners. Therefore, when Hitler unexpectedly offered the hand of friendship in the summer of 1939 he took it. The result was the notorious non-aggression pact of 23 August 1939 that secretly delineated the Soviet and German spheres of influence in eastern Europe, giving western Poland to Hitler and eastern Poland and the Baltic to Stalin. Germany was to move first. When Germany did so, Britain and France entered the war.

For nearly two years Stalin stood aloof from the war in the west, exploiting the conditions created by the pact with Hitler. He traded with Germany while still preparing for war. The preparations were costly and extensive. The Red Army continued to rearm and recruit. Stalin annexed Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and the northern part of Rumania, and moved his defensive lines towards the new western frontier with Greater Germany. Attacking Finland he won a few kilometres of extra territory with which to defend Leningrad at a cost of nearly 400,000 casualties, one third of them dead or missing. The utility of these preparations appears doubtful. The communities living in the Soviet Union's new buffer zone were embittered by the imposition of Soviet rule; when war broke out the territory passed almost immediately into the hands of the invader. Moreover, Stalin believed these preparations to be more effective than his enemy did. He thought he had postponed war several years into the future just as Hitler was bringing forward plans to end the peace with a surprise attack.

Stalin's true intentions, had he successfully put off a German attack in 1941, are still debated. Some have read his speeches and the plans of his generals as indicating that he envisaged launching an aggressive war on Germany; beyond that lay a future in which a defeated Germany and an exhausted Britain would leave it open to him to dominate the whole continent. Some of Hitler's generals promoted this idea after the war in order to justify themselves. While Stalin's generals sometimes entertained the idea of a pre-emptive strike, and attack as the best means of defence was the official Soviet military doctrine of the time, the Russian archives have demonstrated clearly that Stalin's main concern was to head off Hitler's colonial ambitions on Soviet territory; he had no plans to conquer Europe himself.

At all events it is clear that Hitler caught Stalin and the Red Army by surprise. Stalin's culpability for this has been much debated. His view of Hitler's intentions was strongly held and incorrect, and he did not permit those around him to challenge it. Still, it is worth recalling that democratic leaders could also be taken by surprise. For example US President Franklyn Roosevelt, though not a brutal dictator, was caught out by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

COURSE OF THE WAR

"Barbarossa", the German operation to destroy the Red Army and seize most of the European part of Russia, began on June 22, 1941. For the next three years Hitler committed no less than 90 per cent of his ground forces to the campaign that followed. German troops quickly occupied the Baltic region, Belorussia, the Ukraine, now incorporating eastern Poland, and a substantial territory in Russia. Millions of Soviet soldiers fell into encirclement. By the end of September, having advanced more than a thousand kilometres on a front more than a thousand kilometres wide, the invaders had captured Kiev, established a stranglehold around Leningrad, and stood at the gates of Moscow.

The Germans advanced rapidly but suffered unexpectedly heavy casualties and equipment losses to chaotic and disorganized Red Army

resistance. They were met with a policy of scorched earth: the Soviet authorities removed or destroyed industrial facilities, food stocks, and essential services before the occupiers arrived. German supply lines were stretched to breaking point.

In the autumn of 1941 Stalin rallied his people by appealing to Russian nationalism and imposing harsh discipline. Soviet resistance denied Hitler his chance of a quick victory at the cost of hideous casualties. Moscow was saved and Leningrad did not surrender. In December Stalin ordered the first strategic Soviet counter-offensive; it was too ambitious and only achieved a few of its goals but for the first time the Germans were caught off balance and had to retreat. There followed a year of inconclusive moves and counter-moves on each side, but the new German successes appeared more striking. In the spring and summer of 1942 German forces advanced more hundreds of kilometres across the south of Russia towards Stalingrad and the Caucasian oilfields. Then, at the end of the year these forces were largely destroyed in the Red Army's defence of Stalingrad and its winter counter-offensive.

After Stalingrad the position of the German forces in the south became untenable and they were compelled to retreat. In the summer of 1943, Hitler staged his last strategic offensive in the east on the Kursk salient; the offensive failed, and was answered by a more devastating Soviet counter-offensive. The German Army could no longer hope to force a stalemate and its eventual defeat became certain. Even so, the liberation of Soviet territory from German occupation took a further eighteen months. The German army did not collapse in defeat. As a result, the Red Army's journey from Kursk to Berlin occupied two years of bloody fighting.

THE ALLIANCE

The German invasion not only turned friends into enemies but also enemies into friends. In July 1941 the British signed a pact with the Soviet Union for mutual assistance. In September President Roosevelt authorised the supply of aid to the Soviet Union under the terms of the Lend-Lease Act. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December the United States joined the war with Germany and the three countries formed an alliance eventually known as the United Nations.

The Alliance was held together by a common interest in the defeat of the Axis powers. Moreover, the Soviet resistance to Hitler electrified world opinion, nowhere more than in the Allied countries. The courage with which the Soviet people faced its suffering aroused respect and admiration. Much of this was focused on the figure of Stalin, who thereby gained an extraordinary political asset.

Behind the scenes the Alliance was fraught with tension. This was for two reasons. One was the division of labour that quickly emerged among the Allies: the richer countries supplied economic aid to the Soviet Union which did most of the fighting. It could not be done more efficiently in any other way. Still, not all Russians felt grateful and Stalin repeatedly demanded that the British and Americans open a

“second front” to draw off the German ground forces to the west; this did not happen until the Allied invasion of France in June 1944.

The other source of tension was different conceptions of the postwar world: the Americans sought a liberalised global economy without empires, while Stalin wanted secure frontiers and a wide sphere of influence across eastern Europe. The British wanted to defend their own empire but were also committed to an independent postwar Poland; this was why they had gone to war in 1939. Anxieties increased as it became clear that Stalin intended eastern Europe generally, and Poland in particular, to become subservient to Soviet interests after the war.

THE WAR EFFORT

The outbreak of war brutally exposed Stalin’s miscalculations. Although badly shocked he was not paralysed. Among his first measures were to create a Chief Headquarters, the *Stavka*, and to begin to evacuate the armor steel rolling mills on the Black Sea coast. While ordering ceaseless, often futile counter-attacks he also authorized the establishment of a broader framework for evacuation of people and assets from the frontline regions. On June 28 his nerve gave way and he gave in briefly to depression; on the afternoon of June 30 other leaders came to urge him to form a war cabinet and he pulled himself together. The result was the State Defence Committee (GKO).

The progress of the war forced Stalin to change his style of leadership. At first he closely involved himself in the detail of military operations, requiring the Red Army to attack continually and ordering vengeful punishments on all who authorized or advocated retreat. He executed several generals. Communications with the front were so poor that a degree of chaos was inevitable, but on a number of occasions Stalin prevented large forces from extricating themselves from encirclement and capture. Evidently he came to recognize this style as counter-productive because he eventually drew back from micro-managing the battlefield; he gave his generals greater freedom to decide operational details by themselves and speak their minds on strategy, although he retained unquestioned authority where he chose to exert it. This led to more effective decision making and, combined with the growing experience and confidence of his officers, laid the foundations of later victories.

Soviet victory in World War II is often cited as the justification for Stalin’s prewar policies of industrialization and rearmament. From a comparative standpoint the success of the Soviet war effort is nonetheless surprising. Why did the Soviet Union not simply fall apart under massive attack, as Russia had done under rather less pressure in World War I? In World War I Russia had disintegrated. As industrial production was diverted to the war effort, farmers withdrew from the market. Food remained in the countryside, while the war workers and soldiers went hungry. The burdens of war were not distributed fairly amongst the population, and this undermined the Russian war effort both materially and psychologically. In World War II the Soviet Union was still relatively poor. Other poor countries such as Italy and Japan

also fell apart as soon as the Allies seriously attacked them. Italy and Japan were relatively reliant on foreign trade and so vulnerable to blockade, but the Soviet Union depended on getting food from tens of millions of low-productivity farm workers to feed its armies and industries; this supply could easily have failed under wartime pressures.

Stalin and his subordinates did not allow the Soviet government and economy to disintegrate. The Soviet institutional capacity for integration and coordination matched that of much more developed economies. As a result, despite still being relatively poor, the USSR was able to commit a high share of national resources to the war effort. After a wobbly start war production soared. Food was procured and rationed effectively: enough was allocated to soldiers and defence workers to permit sustained effort in disastrous circumstances. There was not enough to go round and millions starved, but morale did not collapse in the way that had destroyed the Tsarist monarchy. Thus collective agriculture, although a disaster in peacetime, proved effective in war.

Things nearly went the other way. The outbreak of war was a huge shock not only to Stalin personally but more generally to Soviet institutions. The bureaucratic allocation system did not collapse and planners went on churning out factory plans and coordinating supplies, but these soon became irrelevant. On the supply side many important military–industrial centres were lost and the capacities they represented only existed on paper. On the demand side Army requirements to replace early losses with new supplies of soldiers and equipment were far greater than the plans. For some time the gap between real needs and real resources could not be bridged.

The first phases of mobilization were carried out in an uncontrolled way and this proved very costly. Munitions production soared, but the production of steel, fuel, and other basic industrial goods collapsed. In 1942 there was an economic crisis that resulted not just from the successful German offensives but also from uncontrolled mobilization in 1941. The heart of the war economy now lay in the remote interior, where many defence factories had been relocated from the west and south. But these regions were unready for crash industrialization: they lacked transport, power, sources of metals and components, an administrative and commercial infrastructure, and housing and food for the new workforce. Without these there was no basis for a sustained war effort.

After 1942 several factors allowed the situation to ease. Soviet victory at Stalingrad changed the military balance; the growing Allied air offensive against Germany from the west also helped to draw German resources away from the eastern front. More resources also relaxed the pressure: these came from the recovery of output from its post-invasion trough, the completed relocation of defence industry, and greater pooling of Allied resources through economic aid. It is estimated that in 1943 and 1944 the US Lend-Lease programme contributed roughly 10 per cent of the total resources available to the Soviet economy. From the point of view of the Soviet consumer 1943

appears to have been even worse than 1942, but in 1944 and 1945 there were marked improvements.

In the most dangerous periods of the war Soviet society was held together by a combination of individual voluntarism, national feeling, and brutal discipline. There were crucial moments when the army wavered. In August 1941 and July 1942 Stalin issued notorious orders that stigmatized those who allowed themselves to be taken prisoner as traitors, penalizing their families, and ordered the summary execution of all who retreated without orders. By these barbarous methods order in the armed forces was restored. In the civilian economy minor offences involving absence from work as well as unauthorized quitting were ruthlessly pursued, resulting in hundreds of thousands of criminal cases each year; those convicted were sent to prison or labor camps. Food crimes involving abuse of the rationing system were severely punished, not infrequently by shooting. Spreading defeatist rumors was punished in the same way, even if the rumors told the truth. It is not so much that everyone who supported the war effort was terrorized into doing so; rather, such measures made it much easier for individuals to choose the path of collective solidarity and individual heroism. The barbarity of German occupation policies also contributed to this outcome.

WAR LOSSES

The Soviet experience of warfare was very different from that of its Allies, Britain and the United States. Large in territory and population, the Soviet Union was poorer than the other two by a wide margin in productivity and income per head. It was Soviet territory that Hitler wanted for his empire, and the Soviet Union was the only one of the three to be invaded. Despite this, the Soviet Union mobilized its resources and contributed combat forces and equipment to Allied fighting power far beyond its relative economic strength.

These same factors meant that the Soviet Union suffered far heavier costs and losses than its Allies. After victory Hitler planned to resettle the Ukraine and European Russia with Germans and to divert its food supplies to feeding the German Army. He planned to deprive the urban population of food and drive much of the rural population off the land. Jews and communist officials would be killed and the rest starved into forced migration to the east.

The Soviet Union suffered roughly 25 million war deaths, plus or minus one million, compared with 350,000 war deaths in Britain and 300,000 in the United States; the error margin arises because many war deaths were not recorded at the time and must be estimated statistically after the event. Combat losses account for all US and most British casualties; the German bombing of British cities made up the rest. The sources of Soviet mortality were more varied. Red Army records suggest 6.4 million known military deaths from battlefield causes and half a million more from disease and accidents. In addition 4.6 million soldiers were captured, missing, or killed or missing in units that failed to report. Of these approximately 2.8 million were later repatriated or reenlisted, suggesting 1.8 million deaths in captivity and

a net total of 8.7 million Red Army deaths. But the number of Soviet prisoners and deaths in captivity may be understated more than a million. German records show a total of 5.8 million prisoners, of whom 3.3 million had died by May 1944; most of these were starved, worked, or shot to death. Considering the second half of 1941 alone, Soviet records show 2.3 million soldiers missing or captured, while in the same period the Germans counted 3.3 million prisoners, of whom 2 million had died by February 1942.

Subtracting up to 10 million Red Army war deaths from a 25 million total suggests at least 15 million civilian deaths. Thus many more Soviet civilians died than soldiers, and this is another contrast with British and American experience. Soviet sources have estimated 11.5 million civilian war deaths under German rule, 7.4 million in the occupied territories by killing, hunger, and disease, and another 2.2 million in Germany where they were deported as forced laborers. This leaves room for millions of civilian war deaths on territory under Soviet control, primarily from malnutrition and overwork; of these, one million may have died in Leningrad alone.

In wartime specifically Soviet mechanisms of premature death continued to operate. For example Soviet citizens continued to die from the conditions in labor camps; these became particularly lethal in 1942 and 1943 when a 20 per cent annual death rate killed half a million inmates in two years. In 1943/44 a new cause of death arose: the deportation and internal exile under harsh conditions of ethnic groups such as the Chechens who, Stalin believed, had collaborated as a community with the former German occupiers.

The war also imposed severe material losses on the Soviet economy. The destruction included 6 million buildings that previously housed 25 million people, 31,850 industrial establishments, and 167,000 schools, colleges, hospitals, and public libraries. Officially these losses were estimated at one third of the Soviet Union's prewar wealth; since "only" one in eight people died it follows that wealth was destroyed at a higher rate than people so that those who survived were also impoverished.

CONSEQUENCES OF THE WAR

The war had a greater effect on the external position of the Soviet Union than on its internal organization and structure. The Soviet Union became a dominant regional power and quickly thereafter an atomic superpower. The wartime alliance soon fell apart but the Soviet Union soon replaced it with a network of compliant neighboring states in central and eastern Europe and remodelled them in its own image. This set the stage for the Cold War. In the process the popular sympathy in the west for the Soviet Union's wartime struggle was quickly dissipated.

Within the country, the victory of the wartime alliance gave rise to widespread hopes for political relaxation and an opening outwards but these hopes were soon dashed. For one thing conditions remained extremely tough for a while. Millions were homeless; it was just as hard to restore peacetime production as it had been to convert to a war footing; and the pressure to restore food supplies on top of a bad

harvest led to one million or more famine deaths in the Ukraine and Moldavia in 1946. In addition Stalin used the victory not to concede reforms but to strengthen his personal dictatorship, promote nationalism, and mount new purges although with less publicity than before the war. After an initial phase of demobilization the nuclear arms race and the outbreak of a new conventional war in Korea resulted in resumed growth of military expenditures and revived emphasis on the readiness for war. Not until the death of Stalin did the first signs of real relaxation appear.

After the famine of 1946 the Soviet economy restored prewar levels of production of most commodities with surprising speed. It took much longer, possibly several decades, to return to the path that the economy might have followed without a war. It also took decades for the Soviet population to return to demographic balance; in 1959 women born between 1904 and 1924 outnumbered men of the same generation by three to two, despite the fact that women also fought and starved.

One of the most persistent legacies of the war resulted from the wartime evacuation of industry. After the war, despite some reverse evacuation, the war economy of the interior was kept in existence. Weapons factories in the remote interior, adapted to the new technologies of nuclear weapons and aerospace, were developed into closed, self-sufficient company towns forming giant, vertically integrated systems; they were literally taken off the map so that their very existence became a well kept secret. Thus secretiveness and militarization were taken hand in hand to new levels.

It is easier to describe the Soviet Union after the war than to say what would have happened if the war had gone the other way. World War II was a defining event in world history that engulfed the lives of nearly two thousand million people, but its outcome was decided on the eastern front to a much greater extent than is commonly remembered in western culture and historical writing.

RELATED TOPICS

Cold War
 economic planning
 military-economic planning
 Stalin
 Red Army
 World War I
 war economy

REFERENCES

- Barber, John, and Mark Harrison. (1991). *The Soviet Home Front: a Social and Economic History of the USSR in World War II*. London: Longman.
- Erickson, John. (1962). *The Soviet High Command: A Military-Political History, 1918-1941*. London: Macmillan.
- Erickson, John. (1975). *Stalin's War with Germany*, vol. 1. *The Road to Stalingrad*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

- Erickson, John. (1983). *Stalin's War with Germany*, vol. 2. *The Road to Berlin*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- Erickson, John. (1997). "Red Army Battlefield Performance, 1941-1945: the System and the Soldier." In *Time to Kill: The Soldier's Experience of War in the West, 1939-1945*, eds Paul Addison and Angus Calder, London: Pimlico.
- Erickson, John, and David Dilks. (1994). *Barbarossa: the Axis and the Allies*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press
- Glantz, David M. (1991). *From the Don to the Dnepr: Soviet Offensive Operations, December 1942-August 1943*. London: Cass.
- Glantz, David M., and Jonathan House. (1995). *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler*. Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas.
- Gorodetsky, Gabriel. (1999). *Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Haslam, Jonathan. (1984). *The Soviet Union and the Struggle for Collective Security in Europe, 1933-39*. London: Macmillan.
- Haslam, Jonathan. (1992). *The Soviet Union and the Threat from the East, 1933-41: Moscow, Tokyo, and the Prelude to the Pacific War*. London: Macmillan.
- Harrison, Mark. (1996). *Accounting for War: Soviet Production, Employment, and the Defence Burden, 1940-1945*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Harrison, Mark, ed. (1998). *The Economics of World War II: Six Great Powers in International Comparison*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kershaw, Ian, and Moshe Lewin, eds. (1997). *Stalinism and Nazism: Dictatorships in Comparison*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Moskoff, William. (1990). *The Bread of Affliction: the Food Supply in the USSR During World War II*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Overy, Richard. (1997). *Russia's War*. London: Allen Lane.
- Reese, Roger R. (2000). *The Soviet Military Experience*. London: Routledge.
- Roberts, Geoffrey. (1995). *The Soviet Union and the Origins of the Second World War: Russo-German Relations and the Road to War, 1933-1941*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Roberts, Geoffrey. (2000). *Victory at Stalingrad: the Battle That Changed History*. London: Longman.
- Salisbury, Harrison. (1969). *The 900 Days: the Siege of Leningrad*. London: Pan.
- Suvorov, Viktor [Vladimir Rezun]. (1990). *Ice-Breaker: Who Started the Second World War?* London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Urlanis, B.Ts. (1971). *Wars and Population*. Moscow: Progress.
- Volkogonov, Dmitri. (1991). *Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson.
- Weeks, Albert L. (2002). *Stalin's Other War: Soviet Grand Strategy, 1939-1941*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield
- Wegner, Bernd, ed. (1997). *From Peace to War: Germany, Soviet Russia, and the World, 1939-1941*. Providence, RI: Berghahn.

- Weinberg, Gerhard L. (1995). *A World at Arms: a Global History of World War II*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Werth, Alexander. (1964). *Russia at War, 1941-1945*. London: Barrie & Rockliff.

MARK HARRISON
Department of Economics
University of Warwick
Coventry CV4 7AL
mark.harrison@warwick.ac.uk