

Assess the reasons for the outbreak of the Great Patriotic War

"Ideological considerations played no direct role behind the initial planning of the attack" - Ian Kershaw

Although Kershaw's analysis of the beginning of the Great Patriotic War appears to place the strategic considerations of World War Two, namely the need to force the UK to the negotiating table whilst curtailing Soviet access to Balkans oilfields, at the centre of events, the overall picture needs more investigation. How important were these ideological considerations within Hitler's actions not just in late 1940 onwards, but when considered as a whole? To what extent did Stalin's domestic and foreign policy errors invite the 1941 invasion? How important were the roles of the UK and France in the eventual conflict on the Eastern Front?

From 1924 onwards, Hitler had become ideologically fixated upon the USSR as the ultimate opponent for all that Nazi Germany represented. His repeated use of words such as crusade, JudeoBolshevist threat, untermenschen, ubermenschen all with hindsight indicate he was determined to engage in a race war with the USSR at some stage in the future. The development of that ideology had seen his ultranationalist views on world struggle, racial hierarchy, Aryan superiority and anti-Semitism coalesce into a vision that alongside his personal leadership saw the NSDAP align with popular sentiments in Germany in the 1930s. The resultant rise to power of the Nazis and the establishment of their authoritarian, war-focused state used this ideology as their foundation, with the projected expansion east to claim Lebensraum portrayed as being the only possible way forward for Hitler's 1000 Year Reich. In this context, Nazi dogma and ideological tenets made conflict with the USSR unavoidable.

However, why June 1941? Kershaw's claim about practicality overcoming ideology in the immediate run-up to the war has more basis here, but his focus on Germany, as a Nazi scholar, and their war aims also fail to take into consideration the wider picture. As Figes points out, *"Stalin must have realized that he himself was to blame for this disaster"*. His disappearance for the best part of a week after June 22nd gives credence to this. His

policies from 1928, which had seen him relegate Comintern activity in favour of domestic priorities with them relegated to issuing scathing accusations of 'social fascism' against potential Western left wing allies, had seen the USSR become even more isolated on the world stage than previously. Half-hearted attempts at keeping the spirit of Rapallo alive disappeared with the rise of Hitler, and instead now propelled USSR foreign policy in the opposite direction. The 1930s therefore were spent in a lonely and somewhat fruitless quest for anti-fascist alliance, the largely anodyne 1932 Non-aggression pact with France and various local deals aside. Western European powers kept their distance, sceptical about Stalin's intent and the rumoured nature of his rule over the course of the 1930s. These of course included the relative successes of the Five Year Plans which saw Soviet military capabilities explode with increased production of vital industrial good such as steel (400% increase to 17.7 million tonnes by the end of the 1930s); oil (250% to 28.5 million tonnes); and electricity (700% to 36.2 thousand million kw hours). However, this increased capability, which put off many Western allies, was fatally undercut by Stalin's ruthless purging of all areas of society with his targeting of the military between 1938 and 1940 particularly damaging. Its removal of over 80 000 Red Army officers rendered the armed forces militarily leaderless. Figs' argument, contained as it is within his perspective of successive Russian leaders unwilling to change and give up power, therefore carries some weight in explaining why the Germans chose 1941 to attack its isolated and neutered erstwhile ally. However, given his position as a Russian and Soviet expert, this conclusion in isolation lacks context and doesn't help explain why the summer of 1941.

Finally, Kershaw's argument finds most support when one looks at the strategic and diplomatic environment which sees the outbreak of hostilities in the East. The 1930s had seen, as already mentioned, a distance maintained between the USSR and the West. This was only one element of British and French Appeasement policies which allowed Nazi Germany to build up a military capability and level of confidence which then saw them declare war on the USSR and USA within six months in 1941. The reluctance of the French to oppose German remilitarisation of the Rhineland was a watershed moment, with Nazi documents outlining how Wehrmacht commander were to retreat if opposed by any substantial French force. Likewise, the message sent out over the Spanish Civil War and the Sudeten Crisis by the British Governments of Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain with

their continuing inaction and vacillation, served only to encourage an increasingly aggressive and determined Hitler. Without these crucial steps, Nazi Germany may never have crossed the Rhine let alone the Dnieper. However, the crucial invasion of Poland (justified in Hitler's eyes ideologically, and then practically given the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact) saw war break out unexpectedly. Hitler therefore now had to deal with immediate war and an implacable enemy in Winston Churchill. Kershaw's claim that it was strategic concerns about the British and facing an expansive USSR in the East at the end of 1940 therefore does help explain the exact timing of the attack, but on its own lacks context.

In conclusion therefore, whilst both Kershaw and Figes raise fundamentally important points about the timing of the invasion of the USSR by Germany in 1941, and which both point to internal Soviet and wider European reasons why Barbarossa took place at that time, the underlying nature of Nazi ideology and determination of Hitler to engage in an apocalyptic race war means the war was inevitable from the time that he rose to power in 1933.