The German people themselves—and especially the Berliners—played important and ultimately decisive roles” (p. xvii). Significant though Germany was in the Cold War, its role was not quite as dominant as Smyser implies.


Reviewed by Alexander Dallin, Stanford University

The 22 months between the signing of the Nazi-Soviet pact on 23 August 1939 and the German invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941 were among the most exciting, baffling, and controversial periods in Soviet foreign policy and in recent international relations. Gabriel Gorodetsky’s book, *Grand Delusion*, makes an important contribution to our understanding of this period, albeit a contribution that will be challenged and debated. It is the most comprehensive, most thoroughly researched, and most cogently argued account of Soviet policy yet to appear. Not only is it a good history of its main subject, the German invasion; it also places this subject into a broader context, with detailed coverage of topics such as British and Japanese policy, controversies over the Balkans, and the flight of Rudolf Hess to Britain.

The book is based on an impressive range of sources. Gorodetsky used materials from the British, American, and German archives as well as a larger range of Soviet documents—political, military, and security—than were previously available. The author also consulted files in the Yugoslav and Bulgarian archives along with a number of other neglected sources, including Swedish and French diplomatic dispatches and unpublished diaries and memoirs by key figures like Ivan Maisky and Sir Stafford Cripps. The analysis is carefully documented, and the errors are comparatively few and mostly trivial. To cite some examples: The Montreux Convention was concluded in 1936, not 1923; the secret protocol to the Nazi-Soviet Pact was signed on 23 August, not “a month later” (p. 3); and the dissolution of the Comintern did not occur until 1943 and thus had nothing to do with the appeasement of Nazi Germany (p. 320).

Despite the richness of Gorodetsky’s account, the evidence he presents does not fundamentally alter the conventional wisdom about the period. He does, however, show that in the first half of 1941 top Soviet leaders, including Josif Stalin, were more fully informed about German preparations for invasion than was formerly assumed. Apparently, Soviet raw intelligence was quite extensive and impressive. (The processing and analysis of this information were, of course, a very different matter.) Gorodetsky downplays the role of Winston Churchill’s famous warning to Stalin, but this seems to be motivated in part by Gorodetsky’s strong anti-British animus. He is correct, however, in arguing that Stalin was so mistrustful of the British that he dismissed British warnings of German war preparations and suspected that Churchill was attempting to drag the Soviet Union into the war on Britain’s side. Moreover, Gorodetsky confirms earlier suspicions that the Soviet intelligence reports submitted
to Stalin were selective. Subordinates frequently tailored their interpretations to reinforce Stalin's biases (see, for example, pp. 180 and 297ff.).

Gorodetsky is convincing in demolishing the so-called Icebreaker hypothesis, which posits that the German invasion was intended to preempt a Soviet attack on Germany. This argument was fabricated by postwar German historians and by a Soviet defector, Victor Suvorov. It has no factual foundation and deserves to be put to rest—something that one hopes this book will do.

More questionable is Gorodetsky's emphasis on the role of Bulgaria and Yugoslavia in precipitating the German attack. Clearly there were sharp differences between Berlin and Moscow over the Balkans and the Straits, but this study may overstate them. The basic shift in orientation came, as Gorodetsky understands, after the defeat of France in June 1940 had revealed Stalin's miscalculation. At that time, Balkan issues were not yet salient. Nor were they acute when Hitler issued his “Barbarossa” order in December 1940. Germany’s occupation of Yugoslavia and Bulgaria’s adherence to the Axis certainly created tensions between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, but the author errs in attributing Soviet interest in Bessarabia to the fear of a British threat to the Black Sea. Germany had ceded Bessarabia to the Soviet Union in the secret protocol of 1939, and Moscow followed up on the provision a year later. The same was true of Northern Bukovina, which was rather remote from the Black Sea.

The Soviet Union’s disastrous lack of preparation for the German invasion is the fundamental issue explored in the book, and historians will certainly debate the author’s thesis. Gorodetsky argues that no matter what the Soviet Union might have done, there was no way to prepare for the Nazi onslaught, given the inferiority of the Soviet military to the German war machine. This explanation does not hold up. Whole units of the Soviet air force were caught on the ground, totally unprepared and undefended, primarily because Stalin refused to allow any military preparations that might be construed as “provocative” to Germany.

Stalin’s stubborn commitment to the appeasement of Nazi Germany was a key factor in Moscow’s failure to prepare for the German invasion, as Gorodetsky convincingly demonstrates. Stalin seemed confident that Hitler would, at the very least, present a set of new demands—perhaps in the form of an ultimatum—before launching a surprise attack. Until such demands materialized, Stalin wanted to avoid doing anything that could be deemed “hostile” or “provocative.” Gorodetsky believes that this policy of appeasement was rational and pragmatic, but he does not say how Stalin’s fundamental self-deception—his refusal to believe that Hitler might attack—can be reconciled with rationality and pragmatism. Nor does Gorodetsky explain how Stalin’s failure to make military preparedness a top priority (e.g., p. 321) could be construed as “pragmatic.” The tension between rationality and self-delusion is never resolved in the book. Gorodetsky tries to bolster his case by citing the arguments of Henry Kissinger and others who describe Stalin’s wartime diplomacy vis-à-vis the Western allies as rational. But judgments about wartime diplomacy cannot simply be projected backward to the 1939–1941 period. This would be as dubious as claiming that Stalin’s irrationality during the Great Terror can be projected ahead to the years of the Nazi-Soviet Pact.
One result of this approach is that Gorodetsky too often whitewashes Stalin’s own role. Throughout the book, Stalin emerges as a victim of others, including Churchill, Cripps, Rudolf Hess, and the German ambassador to Moscow, Count Friedrich von der Schulenburg. Gorodetsky also depicts Stalin as a victim of unfounded reports of a split between the German military and the Nazi party. None of this is particularly convincing. The failure ultimately was Stalin’s own. He had persistent warnings not only from abroad, but also from his key military commanders, such as Georgii Zhukov and Semen Timoshenko; yet he chose to disregard them.

It is also possible to quarrel with a number of other interpretations. Gorodetsky dismisses the role of ideology in Stalin’s thinking and instead stresses the impact of the “tsarist legacy” (p. 316). Yet he provides not the slightest evidence that the “tsarist legacy” was the chief motivation for Stalin. Gorodetsky’s insistence on Stalin’s “defensiveness” (p. 119) leads to his repeated claims that the Soviet leader was merely pursuing national security rather than territorial expansion. This argument overlooks the fact that security and expansion are not mutually exclusive. Security through expansion was a central part of Stalin’s outlook. By attributing Soviet conquest of the Baltic states to the collapse of France, Gorodetsky fails to recognize that the Germans had already ceded those states to the Soviet Union in the August and September 1939 protocols.

This book, then, is likely to spark disagreement and debate. Even so, it will remain the standard account of this fascinating period for a long time to come.


Reviewed by Christoph Neidhart, Harvard University

Analysis of nonverbal communications is a tricky business, especially when such communications took place 80 years ago and are recorded only in written (hence verbal) sources. Signs and symbols have ambiguous meanings, as do catchphrases and rumors, and people with diverse convictions can appropriate them as their own. The flexibility of symbols increases their effectiveness and power, and it leaves plenty of room for interpretation.

A good example of the flexibility of symbols is found in the red flag: How did Russians understand the red flag and whom did it represent in 1917? In the 1905 and March 1917 revolutions, demonstrators often tore off the white and blue stripes of the Russian flag, leaving only the red portion. After March 1917, Petrograd was festooned with red banners. Is it then possible to claim that the red flag connoted vast popular support for the Bolsheviks?

In *Interpreting the Russian Revolution*, Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitskii analyze the role of flags, symbols, and songs in 1917. They demonstrate that the red flag had a “polyvalent nature”—it was a universal symbol of the revolution and a general call for change rather than a symbol of Bolshevik power. It was thus a symbol with