When Stalin Faced Hitler: Who Fooled Whom?

By Stephen Kotkin

Through the first four decades of his life, Joseph Stalin achieved little. He was born in 1878 to a poor family in Gori, Georgia, then part of the Russian empire. His father was a cobbler; his mother, a cleaning lady and seamstress. Stalin’s childhood, illnesses and mishaps included, was largely normal for the time. He received good marks in school and, as a teenager, got his poems published in well-regarded Georgian periodicals. (“To this day his beautiful, sonorous lyrics echo in my ears,” one reader would later recall.) But he did not sit for his final-year exams at the Tiflis Seminary and failed to graduate. Instead of becoming a priest, he became an underground revolutionary fighting tsarist oppression, spending the next 20 years hiding, organizing, and serving time in prison and internal exile in Siberia.

Stalin’s life was altered forever by the outbreak of total war in 1914, which helped precipitate the Russian tsar’s abdication in February 1917 and, later that year, a putsch by radical leftists led by Vladimir Lenin. Suddenly, the 39-year-old Stalin was a leading member of the new Bolshevik regime.

He played a central role in the Russian Civil War and the creation of the Soviet Union. In 1922, Lenin appointed him head of the Communist Party. A month later, Lenin was incapacitated by a stroke, and Stalin seized his chance to create his own personal dictatorship inside the larger Bolshevik one. Beginning in the late 1920s, he forced through the building of a socialist state, herding 120 million peasants onto collective farms or into the gulag and arresting and murdering immense numbers of loyal people in the officer corps, the secret police, embassies, spy networks, scientific and artistic circles, and party organizations.

The vast shadow of Stalin the despot often hides Stalin the human being. He collected watches. He played skittles and billiards. He loved gardening and Russian steam baths. He liked colored pencils—blue, red, and green. He drank mineral water and wines from his native Georgia. He smoked a pipe, using tobacco from cigarettes, which he would unroll and slide into the pipe—usually two cigarettes’ worth—and then light with matches. He kept his desk in order.

Stalin had a passion for books, which he marked up and filled with placeholders to find particular passages. His personal library would ultimately grow to more than 20,000 volumes. He annotated works by Karl Marx and Lenin, of course, but also Russian translations of Plato and Clausewitz, as well as the writings of Alexander Svechin, a former tsarist officer whom Stalin never trusted but who demonstrated that the only constant in war was an absence of constants. Among Russian authors, Stalin’s favorite was probably Anton Chekhov, who portrayed villains, and not just heroes, with complexity. Still, judging by the references scattered among his writings and speeches, he spent more time reading Soviet-era literature. His jottings in whatever he read were often irreverent: “Rubbish,” “fool,” “scumbag,” “piss off,” “ha-ha!”
Stalin’s manners were coarse, and his sense of humor perverse. But he cultivated a statesmanlike appearance, editing out his jokes and foul language from the transcripts of official gatherings. He
appears to have had few mistresses, and definitely no harem. His family life was neither particularly happy nor unhappy. Personal life was subsumed in politics.

Stalin spoke softly, sometimes inaudibly, because of a defect in his vocal cords. He relished being called Koba, after the Georgian folk-hero avenger (and a real-life benefactor who had underwritten Stalin’s education). But one childhood chum had called him Geza, a Gori-dialect term for the unusual gait Stalin had developed after an accident. He had to swing his hip all the way around to walk. A childhood bout with smallpox had left lifelong scars on his nose, lower lip, chin, and cheeks.

It is tempting to find in such deformities the wellsprings of bloody tyranny: torment, self-loathing, inner rage, bluster, a mania for adulation. His pockmarks were airbrushed out of public photographs, and his awkward stride was hidden from public view. (Film of him walking was prohibited.) But people who met him saw the facial disfigurement and odd movement; they also discovered that he had a limp handshake and was not as tall as he appeared in photographs. He stood five feet seven inches, roughly the same as Napoleon and one inch shorter than Adolf Hitler. And yet, despite their initial shock on seeing him for the first time—could this be Stalin?—most people found that they could not take their gaze off him, especially his expressive eyes.

THE DREAM PALACE

Stalin saw himself and his country as menaced from every direction. After seizing power in 1917, Lenin and his followers had obsessed over the “capitalist encirclement” their coup had brought about: now, this structural paranoia fed, and was fed by, Stalin’s personal paranoia. Such were the paradoxes of power: the closer the country got to achieving socialism, Stalin argued, the sharper the class struggle became; the more power Stalin personally wielded, the more he still needed. Triumph shadowed by treachery became the dynamic of both the revolution and his life. Beginning in 1929, as the might of the Soviet state and Stalin’s personal dictatorship grew and grew, so, too, did the stakes. His drive to build socialism would prove both successful and shattering, and deeply reinforcing of his hypersuspicious, vindictive disposition.

Communism was an idea, a dream palace whose attraction derived from its seeming fusion of science and utopia, and Stalin was an ideologue. In the Marxist conception, capitalism had created great wealth by replacing feudalism, but then promoted only the interests of the exploiter class, at the expense of the rest of humanity. Once capitalism was overcome, the thinking went, the forces of production would be unleashed as never before. Exploitation, colonization, and imperialist war would give way to solidarity, emancipation, and peace. To be sure, socialism in practice had been difficult to imagine. But whatever it was, it could not be capitalism. Logically, socialism would be built by eradicating private property, the market, and “bourgeois” parliaments and putting in their place collective property, socialist planning, and people’s power. Of course, as Stalin and many other Marxists avowed, the capitalists would never allow themselves to be buried. Rather, they would fight to the death against socialism, using every means—lies, espionage, murder—because this was a war in which only one class could emerge victorious. Socialism, therefore, would also have to use mass violence and deceit. The most terrible crimes became morally imperative acts in the name of creating paradise on earth.

The purported science of Marxism-Leninism ostensibly explained why the world had so many problems (class) and how it could be made better (class warfare), with a role for all. People’s
otherwise insignificant lives became linked to building an entirely new world. To collect grain or operate a lathe was to strike a hammer blow at world imperialism. It did not hurt that those who took part stood to gain personally: idealism and opportunism are always reinforcing. Accumulated resentments, too, fueled the aspiration to become significant. People under the age of 29 made up nearly half of the Soviet population, giving the country one of the youngest demographic profiles in the world, and the youth proved especially attracted to a vision that put them at the center of a struggle to build tomorrow today.

Stalin personified communism’s lofty vision. A cult would be built around him, singling him out as vozhd, an ancient Slavic word that came to mean something like “supreme leader”—the Russian equivalent of “duce” or “führer.” Stalin resisted the cult, calling himself “shit compared with Lenin.” According to his close associate Anastas Mikoyan, Stalin once rebuked another Soviet official, saying, “Why do you praise me alone, as if one man decides everything?” Whether Stalin’s objections reflected false modesty or genuine embarrassment remains hard to say, but he indulged the prolonged ovations he received in public. “At first,” recalled Vyacheslav Molotov, who served as Stalin’s principal lieutenant for decades, “he resisted the cult of personality, but then he came to like it a bit.”

Stalin was a ruler of seemingly irreconcilable contradictions. He could flash burning anger; he could glow with a soft, capacious smile. He could be solicitous and charming; he latched on to perceived slights and compulsively sought revenge. He prided himself on his voracious reading and his ability to quote the wisdom of Marx or Lenin; he resented fancy-pants intellectuals who he thought put on airs. He possessed a phenomenal memory and a mind of scope; his intellectual horizons were severely circumscribed by primitive theories of class struggle and imperialism. He developed a feel for the aspirations of the masses and incipient elites; he almost never visited factories or farms, or even state agencies, instead reading about the country he ruled in secret reports and newspapers. He was a cynic about everyone’s supposed base motives; he lived and breathed his own ideals.

Stalin did what winning leaders do: he articulated and drove toward a consistent goal, in his case a powerful state backed by a unified society that had eradicated capitalism and built industrial socialism. “Murderous” and “mendacious” do not begin to describe him. At the same time, Stalin galvanized millions. His colossal authority was rooted in a dedicated party, a formidable governing apparatus, and Marxist-Leninist ideology. But his power was magnified many times over by ordinary people, who projected onto him their ambitions for social justice, peace, abundance, and national greatness. Dictators who amass great power often retreat into pet pursuits, expounding interminably on their obsessions and paralyzing the state. But Stalin’s obsession was a socialist great power, and he labored day and night to build one. Stalin was a myth, but he proved equal to the myth.

“A TREMENDOUS CHAP”

Hitler was 11 years Stalin’s junior, born in 1889 in a frontier region of Austria-Hungary. He lost his father at age 13 and his mother at 18. (The Jewish physician who tended to his mother would recall that in 40 years of practicing medicine, he had never seen anyone as broken with grief over a mother’s death as Hitler.) At age 20, Hitler found himself on a bread line in Vienna, his inheritance and savings nearly spent. He had twice been rejected from Vienna’s Academy of Fine Arts (“sample drawing unsatisfactory”) and was staying in a homeless shelter behind a railway
station. A vagrant on the next bed recalled that Hitler’s “clothes were being cleaned of lice, since for days he had been wandering about without a roof and in a terribly neglected condition.” Soon, with a small loan from an aunt, Hitler got himself into a group home for men. He managed to find odd jobs, such as painting picture postcards and drafting advertisements. He also frequented the city’s public libraries, where he read political tracts, newspapers, the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, and the fiction of Karl May, set in the cowboys-and-Indians days of the American West or in the exotic Near East.

Hitler dodged the Austrian draft. When the authorities finally caught up with him, they judged the undernourished and gloomy youth unfit for service. He fled across the border to Munich, and in August 1914, he joined the German army as a private. He ended World War I still a private, but the war’s aftermath transformed his life. He would be among the many who migrated from the political left to the right in the chaotic wake of imperial Germany’s defeat.

*Under Stalin, the most terrible crimes became morally imperative acts in the name of creating paradise on earth.*

Film footage from 1918 shows Hitler marching in the funeral procession of provincial Bavaria’s murdered leader, a Jewish Social Democrat; he is wearing two armbands, one black (for mourning) and the other red. In April 1919, after Social Democrats and anarchists formed the Bavarian Soviet Republic, the Communists quickly seized power; Hitler, who contemplated joining the Social Democrats, served as a delegate from his battalion’s soviet (council). He had no profession to speak of but appears to have taken part in leftist indoctrination of the troops. Ten days before Hitler’s 30th birthday, the Bavarian Soviet Republic was quickly crushed by the so-called Freikorps, made up largely of war veterans. Hitler remained in the military because a superior, the chief of the German army’s “information” department, had the idea of sending him to an antileftist instructional course and then using him to infiltrate leftist groups. The officer recalled that Hitler “was like a tired stray dog looking for a master” and “ready to throw in his lot with anyone who would show him kindness.” The assignment as an informant led to Hitler’s involvement in a minuscule right-wing group, the German Workers’ Party, which had been established to draw workers away from communism and which Hitler, with the assistance of rabidly anti-Semitic émigrés from the former imperial Russia, would remake into the National Socialist German Workers’ Party, or Nazi Party.

Although he had begun to earn a reputation as a transfixing far-right agitator, Hitler remained a marginal figure. When Stalin was the new general secretary of the Communist Party of the largest state in the world, Hitler was in prison for a failed 1923 attempt to seize power in Munich, which would be derided as “the Beer Hall Putsch.” He was convicted and sentenced to five years. Still, he managed to turn his trial into a triumph. One of the judges remarked, “What a tremendous chap, this Hitler!” Indeed, even though Hitler was an Austrian citizen, the presiding judge allowed him to stay in Germany, reasoning that the law requiring deportation “cannot apply to a man who thinks and feels as German as Hitler, who voluntarily served for four and a half years in the German army at war, who attained high military honors through outstanding bravery in the face of the enemy, was wounded.”

During his first two weeks in prison, Hitler refused to eat, believing he deserved to die, but letters arrived congratulating him as a national hero. Richard Wagner’s daughter-in-law, Winifred, sent paper and pencil, encouraging him to write a book. Hitler had an attendant in confinement,
Rudolf Hess, who typed his dictation, creating an autobiography dedicated to the 16 Nazis killed in the failed putsch. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler portrayed himself as a man of destiny and pledged to revive Germany as a great power and rid it of Jews, anointing himself “the destroyer of Marxism.” In December 1924, after serving only 13 months, he was released. But his book sales disappointed, a second book failed to find a publisher, and his Nazi Party struggled at the ballot box. Lord D’Abernon, the British ambassador to Berlin at the time, summarized Hitler’s political life after his early release from prison as “fading into oblivion.”

History is full of surprises. That this Austrian member of a fringe political movement would become the dictator of Germany, and Stalin’s principal nemesis, was scarcely imaginable in 1924. But Hitler turned out to be a master improviser: often uncertain, but a man possessed of radical ideas who sensed where he was ultimately going and grasped opportunities that came his way. Stalin, too, was a strategist in that sense: a man of radical ideas able to perceive and seize opportunities that he did not always create but turned to his advantage. The richest opportunities perceived by Stalin and Hitler were often supposedly urgent “threats” that they inflated or invented. History is driven by the interaction of geopolitics, institutions, and ideas—but it takes historical agents to set it all in motion.

Stalin’s direct experience of Germany consisted of just a few months in 1907 in Berlin, where he stopped on the way back to Russia from a Bolshevik meeting in London. He studied but never mastered the German language. But like several tsarist predecessors, Stalin was a Germanophile, admiring that country’s industry and science—in a word, its modernity. But for the longest time, Stalin had no idea of Hitler’s existence.

Then, in 1933, Hitler was handed the wheel of the great state Stalin admired. The lives of the two dictators had run in parallel, as the historian Alan Bullock wrote. But it was the intersection that would matter: two very different men from the peripheries of their societies who were bloodily reviving and remaking their countries, all while unknowingly (and then knowingly) drawing ever closer. It was not only the German people who turned out to be waiting for Hitler.
On Saturday, June 21, 1941, Stalin paced and paced in his Kremlin office, with his usual short steps, gripping a pipe. Inside the triangular Kremlin, the Imperial Senate formed its own triangular stronghold, and Stalin’s wing was a fortress within the fortress. Even the regime personnel with regular Kremlin passes needed a special pass to enter Stalin’s wing. It came to be known to regime insiders as the Little Corner. The walls in the offices were lined with shoulder-height wood paneling, under the theory that wood vapors enhanced air quality, and the elevators were paneled with mahogany. Behind Stalin’s working desk hung a portrait of Lenin. In a corner, on a small table, stood a display case with Lenin’s death mask. Another small table held several telephones. (“Stalin,” he would answer.) Next to the desk was a stand with a vase holding fresh fruit. In the rear was a door that led to a room for relaxation (although rarely used for that purpose), with oversize hanging maps and a giant globe. In the main office, between two of the three large windows that let in afternoon sun, sat a black leather couch where, in his better moods, Stalin sipped tea with lemon.

Over the years, people who were granted an audience with him surmised that he paced to control his explosive emotions or, alternatively, to unnerve those in his company. Invariably, he would be the only one in the room standing, trundling back and forth, sidling up to people while they were speaking. Only a few intimates knew that Stalin suffered nearly constant pain in the joints of his legs, which may have been a genetic condition and which movement partly alleviated. He also
strolled the Kremlin grounds, usually alone, touching the leaves on the trees and shooing away black ravens. (Afterward, guards would come and massacre the birds.)

Stalin had eliminated private property and made himself responsible for the Soviet equivalents of Washington, Wall Street, and Hollywood all rolled into one, and all rolled into one person. He complained of fatigue, especially toward the end of his long workdays, and suffered from insomnia, a condition never acknowledged publicly. A tiny group of insiders knew of his infections and multiday fevers. Rumors of various health problems had circulated abroad, and the use of foreign doctors had long ago been discontinued. But a narrow circle of Russian physicians had acquired detailed knowledge of his illnesses and of his bodily deformities, including his barely usable left arm, the thick, discolored toenails on his right foot, and the two webbed toes on his left foot (an omen, in traditional Russian folklore, of Satanic influence). For long periods, Stalin resisted being seen by any doctor, and he had ceased using medicines from the Kremlin pharmacy that were issued in his name. The household staff had stopped bringing his meals from the Kremlin canteen, cooking them in his apartment instead and, in his presence, tasting from the plates. All the same, Stalin’s stomach was a wreck. He suffered from regular bouts of diarrhea. Hitler was a master improviser who grasped opportunities that came his way.

The Imperial Senate had been built by the Teutonic empress of Russia, Catherine the Great, for “the glorification of Russian statehood.” A few decades after its opening, in the early fall of 1812, Napoleon had arrived with his invading forces. Members of the French Grande Armée—which included many Protestants and Catholics from Germany, Italy, and Poland—had defecated in the Kremlin’s Orthodox churches and taken potshots at the holy icons. After cunning Russian resistance starved the occupiers, a retreating Napoleon had ordered the Kremlin blown to pieces. Heavy rains limited the damage, but the explosives destroyed parts of the walls and several towers. The Imperial Senate suffered a fire.

The long, red-carpeted corridors around the Little Corner were attended by an army of sentries. “See how many of them there are?” Stalin once remarked to a military commander. “Each time I take this corridor, I think, which one? If this one, he will shoot me in the back, and if it is the one around the corner, he will shoot me in the front.” The commander was dumbfounded by such paranoia: after all, there had never been a single genuine assassination attempt against Stalin. But the “Man of Steel”—“deeper than the ocean, higher than the Himalayas, brighter than the sun, teacher of the universe,” in the words of the Kazakh national poet—was being stalked from afar.

In the summer of 1941, it seemed clear that Hitler had won World War II. He had annexed his native Austria, the Czech lands, much of Poland, and a strip of Lithuania, creating the Greater Germany that in 1871 Otto von Bismarck had deliberately avoided forging during the wars of German unification (deeming Austria-Hungary’s existence vital for the balance of power). Hitler’s troops had occupied the Balkans, Denmark, the Low Countries, Norway, and northern France. Leaders loyal to the führer ruled Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, Hungary, Italy, Romania, and Spain. Hitler essentially controlled all of Europe from the English Channel to the Soviet border; only Sweden and Switzerland remained neutral, and both were cooperating with Nazi Germany economically. True, the defiant British still refused to come to terms, but London could never overturn Berlin’s continental dominance.

Stalin was strictly observing the nonaggression pact that Germany and the Soviet Union had signed in August 1939. At that time, Hitler, who had decided to swallow Poland by force, needed
to keep the Soviet Union out of a possible anti-German coalition with France and the United Kingdom. Stalin extracted a highly favorable bargain. As Hitler rampaged across the rest of Europe, Stalin avoided having to face Germany’s military might and, taking advantage of the situation, occupied and soon annexed the Baltic states, eastern Poland, and the eastern European regions of Bukovina and Bessarabia. Moreover, in exchange for Soviet grain and oil, Stalin received advanced machine tools and state-of-the-art weaponry from Germany.

Stalin’s apprenticeship in high-stakes diplomacy had shown him to be cunning but also opportunistic, avaricious, obdurate. His approach had remained the same: prepare for war with a massive armaments buildup, yet do everything to avoid fighting while allowing the British and the Germans to go at each other. This had worked, until Germany—aided by the cornucopia of Soviet raw materials—conquered France in the summer of 1940, and Germany was freed up to turn its troops toward the Soviet Union. The two geopolitical and ideological rivals, as a result of their shared aggrandizement, had acquired a common border.
Now, after half a year of contradictory secret reports about a possible German invasion of the Soviet Union, intelligence warnings of an imminent titanic war were coming from everywhere. In Moscow, German embassy personnel were evacuating, taking with them oil paintings, antique rugs, and silver. The Soviet secret police reported that the Italian embassy, too, had received instructions to evacuate. Earlier in the day, a Soviet agent in Bulgaria had reported that a German emissary had said that “a military confrontation is expected on June 21 or 22.” The Chinese Communist leader Zhou Enlai reported to officials at the Comintern, the international communist organization, that his nationalistic rival, Chiang Kai-shek, “is declaring insistently that Germany will attack the USSR, and is even giving a date: June 21, 1941!” This prompted the head of the Comintern to call Molotov. “The situation is unclear,” Molotov told him. “There is a major game under way. Not everything depends on us.”

FAKE NEWS

It was a hot, stifling day, and Stalin’s top aide, Alexander Poskryobyshhev, was sweating profusely, his window open but the leaves on the trees outside utterly still. The son of a cobbler, like the despot he served, Poskryobyshhev occupied the immediate outer office through which all visitors had to pass, and invariably they would spray him with questions—“Why did the Master have me summoned?” “What’s his mood?”—to which he would laconically answer, “You’ll find out.” He was indispensable, handling all the phone calls and document piles in just the way the despot preferred. But Stalin had allowed Lavrenti Beria, the feared head of the secret police, to imprison Poskryobyshhev’s beloved wife as a “Trotskyite” in 1939. (Beria had sent a large basket of fruit to their two girls; he then executed their mother.)

Poskryobyshhev sat at his desk trying to cool down with a bottle of mineral water. On Stalin’s instructions, at around 2:00 PM, he phoned General Ivan Tyulenev, head of the Moscow Military District. Soon the general heard Stalin’s muffled voice asking, “Comrade Tyulenev, what is the situation concerning Moscow’s antiaircraft defenses?” After a brief report, Stalin said, “Listen, the situation is unsettled and therefore you should bring the antiaircraft defenses of Moscow up to 75 percent of their readiness state.”

Poskryobyshhev placed the latest intelligence, delivered by a field courier, on Stalin’s desk. Almost all of it was hearsay, rather than purloined documents. The reports were contradictory, contaminated with obviously false information, and often delivered with skepticism. In London, the Soviet ambassador to the United Kingdom wrote in his report that he considered a German attack “unlikely” despite having received information to the contrary from British intercepts of secret German military communications. In Berlin, however, the Soviet ambassador to Germany, after months of equivocation, finally averred that Germany’s actions signaled an imminent invasion. But Stalin evidently concluded that his envoy in Berlin had been fed disinformation and remarked that he was “not such a smart fellow.”

Stalin labeled as “disinformation” whatever he chose not to believe.

For Stalin, the question was not whether war with the Nazi regime was inescapable but whether it was inescapable this year. Scores and scores of invasion warnings had accumulated on his desk,
but 14 specific dates that intelligence reports had identified as the day when Germany would attack had come and gone. The only remaining possibilities were “June 22–25” and “June 21 or 22.” The invasion window would soon shut, because of the short time remaining until the onset of winter. Stalin was virtually home free for another year.

Of course, warnings of impending war were even splashed across the front pages of newspapers all over the world. But knowing how he himself made use of the press, Stalin took the screaming headlines to be planted provocations. He reasoned that the Americans and the British wanted nothing more than for the Germans and the Soviets to become embroiled in war. He was right, of course. But as a result, he dismissed all warnings of a German attack. He knew that Germany was experiencing severe shortages and reasoned that it needed even more supplies from him, thus a German invasion would be self-defeating because it would put those supplies at risk. He knew further that Germany had lost World War I because it had fought on two fronts, and so he reasoned that the Germans understood that it would be suicidal for them to attack the Soviet Union in the east before defeating the United Kingdom in the west.

This kind of reasoning had become a trap for Stalin, allowing him to conclude that the colossal buildup of German forces on his doorstep was not a sign of imminent attack but rather Hitler attempting to blackmail him into giving up territory and making other concessions without a fight. Indeed, a brilliant Nazi disinformation campaign fed the Soviet global spy network with incessant reports about German demands that would follow the vast eastern military buildup. Thus, even Stalin’s best intelligence said both that war was coming and that there would be blackmail. And if the latter were true, the former need not be.

When Stalin damned his intelligence as contaminated by disinformation, therefore, he was right. But the despot had no idea which parts were disinformation and which might be accurate intelligence. He labeled as “disinformation” whatever he chose not to believe.

READY OR NOT, HERE I COME

Colonel Georgy Zakharov, a decorated fighter pilot, had been ordered to conduct a full daylight reconnaissance of the border region on the German side, and he reported that the Wehrmacht was poised to invade. The NKGB, the Soviet secret police agency, had discovered that German saboteurs brazenly crossing the border had been instructed that “in the event German troops cross the frontier before they return to Germany, they must report to any German troop unit located on Soviet territory.” Soviet counterintelligence noted vigorous German recruitment of disaffected people in the Baltic region, Belarus, and Ukraine, who were forming underground groups and engaging in terrorism long after Stalin’s supposed annihilation of the perceived fifth column during the Great Terror. Overburdened Soviet rail lines that were needed to transport troops westward were swamped with tens of thousands of “anti-Soviet elements” being deported. German tanks, warplanes, and pontoons had been advanced into an inner zone protected by barbed wire; now the wire was being removed. The click and whir of German motors resounded across to the Soviet side of the frontier.

At the centerpiece of the Little Corner, a felt-covered conference table, Stalin had held countless sessions devoted to war preparations. He had forced into being upward of 9,000 new industrial enterprises during three Five-Year Plans, and Soviet military production grew even faster than GDP for a decade. He had overseen the formation of 125 new divisions just since 1939, and the Red
Army now stood at 5.37 million troops, the largest military force in the world. It had 25,000 tanks and 18,000 fighter planes, three to four times the size of Germany’s stocks. Stalin knew that Germany was underestimating this massive force out of prejudice as well as ignorance, so he had arranged German visits to Soviet aviation and tank factories, and even allowed German planes nearly unimpeded reconnaissance of Soviet troop concentrations, airfields, naval bases, and fuel and ammunition depots. Stalin also had his spies spread rumors that, if attacked, Soviet aircraft would assault Berlin with chemical and biological agents. In Hitler’s shoes, Stalin would have been deterred.

Stalin clung to his belief that Germany could not attack Russia before defeating the United Kingdom.

Of course, if his own country really was so well armed, why not let an enemy foolishly underestimate it? Because the so-called Winter War between the Soviet Union and Finland, waged in 1939–40, had exposed Soviet military weaknesses not just to Hitler but also to Stalin. (The Soviets had won a crushing victory in the end, but only after being stymied for months by stout Finnish resistance.) The Red Army was still in the middle of a protracted post-Finland technological upgrade and reorganization. The Soviets possessed only around 1,800 advanced heavy tanks; the rest of their tanks were too light relative to their German counterparts. Similarly, the most advanced Soviet warplanes made up just one-quarter of the air force. Stalin’s war preparations also bore the mark of his executions of thousands of loyal officers, especially top commanders such as Vasily Blyukher, whose eye had been deposited in his hand before he died under torture in 1938, and the gifted Mikhail Tukhachevsky, whose blood had been splattered all over his “confession” to being a German agent—not long before Stalin concluded the German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact.

Now, 85 percent of the officer corps was 35 or younger; those older than 45 constituted around one percent. Fully 1,013 Soviet generals were under age 55, and only 63 were older than that. Many had been majors just a short time earlier. Out of 659,000 Soviet officers, only around half had completed military school, while one in four had the bare minimum (a few courses), and one in eight had no military education whatsoever.

TONIGHT’S THE NIGHT

Stalin was keenly aware of these realities, and lately, the despot’s morose side had gotten the upper hand. “Stalin was unnerved and irritated by persistent reports (oral and written) about the deterioration of relations with Germany,” recalled Admiral Nikolai Kuznetsov, the commissar of the Soviet navy, of this period. “He felt that danger was imminent,” recalled Nikita Khrushchev, who was at the time the party boss of Ukraine and had spent much of June in Moscow. “Would our country be able to deal with it? Would our army deal with it?”

June 21 happened to be the summer solstice, the longest day of the year—and it must have seemed interminable. At 5:00 PM, Stalin ordered that party secretaries of all Moscow wards were to stay at their posts. At 6:27 PM, Molotov entered the Little Corner—the first visitor, as usual. At 7:05, in walked Beria, Kuznetsov, Georgy Malenkov (a senior Communist Party secretary responsible for cadres), Grigory Safonov (a young deputy procurator general responsible for military courts), Semyon Timoshenko (a senior military commander), Kliment Voroshilov (a deputy head of the government), and Nikolai Voznesensky (the head of state planning). The
discussion apparently revolved around recent developments pointing toward war and Stalin’s
dread of provocations that might incite it.

Stalin’s military intelligence estimated that only 120 to 122 of Germany’s 285 total divisions were
arrayed against the Soviet Union, versus somewhere between 122 and 126 against the United
Kingdom (the other 37 to 43 were said to be in reserve). In fact, there were around 200 divisions
arrayed against the Soviets—a total of at least three million Wehrmacht soldiers and half a
million troops from Germany’s Axis partners, as well as 3,600 tanks, 2,700 aircraft, 700,000 field
guns and other artillery, 600,000 motor vehicles, and 650,000 horses. The Soviets had massed
around 170 divisions (perhaps 2.7 million men) in the west, along with 10,400 tanks and 9,500
aircraft. The two largest armies in world history stood cheek by jowl on a border some 2,000 miles
long.

Most conspicuously, German forces had occupied their firing positions; the Soviets had not. To be
sure, Stalin had allowed covert strategic redeployments to the western border from the interior.
But he would not permit the assumption of combat positions, which he feared would only play
into the hands of hawks in the German military who craved war and were scheming to force
Hitler’s hand. Soviet planes were forbidden from flying within six miles of the border.
Timoshenko and Georgy Zhukov, another senior military commander, made sure that frontline
commanders did not cause or yield to provocation. Beria also tasked a master assassin with
organizing “an experienced strike force to counter any frontier incident that might be used as an
excuse to start a war.” Soviet commanders could be liquidated by their own side if their forces
returned any German fire.

Soviet intelligence was now reporting that not just Germany but also its eastern allies—Finland,
Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia—were at full war readiness. But Stalin, having long ago ceded
the initiative, was effectively paralyzed. Just about anything he did could be used by Hitler to
justify an invasion.

At 7:00 PM, Gerhard Kegel, a Soviet spy in the German embassy in Moscow, had risked his life,
slipping out to tell his Soviet handler that German personnel living outside the facility had been
ordered to come inside immediately and that “all think that this very night there will be war.” At
8:00 PM, a courier arrived to give Stalin, Molotov, and Timoshenko this new piece of intelligence
in sealed envelopes. In the Little Corner, Kuznetsov, Safonov, Timoshenko, Voroshilov, and
Voznesensky were dismissed at 8:15. Malenkov was dismissed five minutes later. Nothing
significant was decided.

Zhukov phoned in to report that yet another German soldier had defected across the frontier and
was warning of an invasion within a few hours. This was precisely the kind of “provocation” Stalin
feared. He ordered Zhukov to the Kremlin, along with the just-departed Timoshenko. They
entered Stalin’s office at 8:50. Whereas Molotov and Beria parroted Stalin’s denials that Hitler was
going to attack, the two peasant-born commanders could see that Germany was coiled to invade.
Still, when Stalin insisted otherwise, they presumed that he possessed superior information and
insight. In any case, they knew the costs of losing his trust. “Everyone had in their memory the
events of recent years,” Zhukov would later recall. “And to say out loud that Stalin was wrong,
that he is mistaken, to say it plainly, could have meant that without leaving the building, you
would be taken to have coffee with Beria.”
Nonetheless, the pair evidently used the defector’s warnings to urge a general mobilization—tantamount, in Stalin’s mind, to war. “Didn’t German generals send that defector across the border in order to provoke a conflict?” Stalin asked. “No,” answered Timoshenko. “We think the defector is telling the truth.” Stalin: “What do we do now?” Timoshenko allowed the silence to persist. Finally, he suggested, “Put the troops on the western border on high alert.” He and Zhukov had come prepared with a draft directive.

Stalin had himself tried to engage Hitler even as he waited for the blackmail demands he expected Hitler to issue. “Molotov has asked for permission to visit Berlin, but has been fobbed off,” Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi propaganda chief, had written in his diary on June 18. “A naive request.”

“The beginning of every war is like opening the door into a dark room,” Hitler once said.

Stalin, instead of continuing to wait for an ultimatum from Hitler, could have preempted it. This was the last option he had left, and a potentially powerful one. Hitler feared that the wily Soviet despot would somehow seize the initiative and unilaterally, publicly declare dramatic, far-reaching concessions to Germany. Stalin appears to have discussed possible concessions with Molotov, but if he did, no record survives. Evidently, Stalin expected Germany to demand Ukraine, the Caucasian oil fields, and unimpeded transit for the Wehrmacht through Soviet territory to engage the British in the Near East and India. A cunning despot could have publicly declared his willingness to join the hostilities against the United Kingdom, exacting revenge against the great power he most reviled and, crucially, robbing Hitler of his argument that the British were holding out against Germany in anticipation of eventual Soviet assistance. Instead, or in parallel to that, Stalin could have demonstrably begun the withdrawal of Soviet forces back from the entire frontier, which would have struck at the heart of the Nazi leader’s public war rationale: a supposed “preventive attack” against the “Soviet buildup.”

Instead of acting cunningly, Stalin clung to his belief that Germany could not attack Russia before defeating the United Kingdom, even though the British did not have an army on the continent and were neither defending territory there nor in a position to invade from there. He assumed that when Hitler finally issued his ultimatum, he would be able to buy time by negotiating: possibly giving in, if the demands were tolerable, and thereby averting war, or, more likely, dragging out any talks beyond the date when Hitler could have launched an invasion, gaining one more critical year, during which the Red Army’s technological revamp would advance. Failing that, Stalin further assumed that even if hostilities broke out, the Germans would need at least two more weeks to fully mobilize their main invasion force, allowing him time to mobilize, too. When his spies out of Berlin and elsewhere reported that the Wehrmacht had “completed all war preparations,” he did not grasp that this meant that day one would bring full, main-force engagement.

BARBAROSSA BEGINS

In the Little Corner, while the relatively heated discussion with Timoshenko and Zhukov continued, Molotov stepped out. Stalin had him summon the German ambassador, Friedrich Werner von der Schulenburg, to the Imperial Senate for a meeting at 9:30 PM. Schulenburg arrived promptly, direct from overseeing the burning of secret documents at the embassy. The envoy had been deeply disappointed that the Hitler-Stalin Pact, in which he had played an important role, had turned out to be an instrument not for a territorial deal over Poland to avoid
war but for the onset of another world war. Now he feared the much-rumored German-Soviet clash, and recently he had gone to Berlin to see Hitler himself and persuade him of Stalin’s peaceful intentions but had come back empty-handed. In desperation, Schulenburg had sent his embassy counselor to Berlin to try one last time, but this had failed as well.

Molotov demanded to know why Germany was evacuating personnel, thereby fanning rumors of war. He handed Schulenburg a letter of protest detailing systematic German violations of Soviet airspace and plaintively told him that “the German government is unable to understand the cause of Germany’s dissatisfaction in relation to the [Soviet Union], if such dissatisfaction exists.” He complained that “there was no reason for the German government to be dissatisfied with Russia.” Schulenburg responded that “posing those issues [is] justified,” but he shrugged, saying that he was “not able to answer them, because Berlin utterly refrains from informing [me].”

During a state visit to Germany in November 1940, Molotov had gone toe to toe with Hitler in the gargantuan new Reich Chancellery, arguing over clashing spheres of influence in eastern Europe. “No foreign visitor had ever spoken to [Hitler] in this way in my presence,” the führer’s translator later wrote. But now Molotov could merely express, several times, his regret that Schulenburg was “unable to answer the questions raised.”

Molotov shuffled back to Stalin’s Little Corner. Suddenly, around 10:00 PM, amid the still suffocating heat, the winds gushed, billowing the curtains at open windows. Then came the thunderclaps. Moscow was struck by a torrential downpour.

Finally, Stalin yielded to his insistent soldiers and accepted their draft directive. Timoshenko and Zhukov rushed out of the Little Corner at 10:20, armed, at long last, with an order for full-scale war mobilization, Directive Number 1. “A surprise attack by the Germans is possible during 22–23 June 1941,” it stated. “The task of our forces is to refrain from any kind of provocative action that might result in serious complications.” It ordered that “during the night of June 22, 1941, the firing positions of the fortified regions on the state border are to be secretly occupied,” that “before dawn on June 22, 1941, all aircraft stationed in the field airdromes are to be dispersed and carefully camouflaged,” that “all units are to be put in a state of military preparedness,” and that “no further measures are to be carried out without specific instructions.” It carried the signatures of Timoshenko and Zhukov. The military men had managed to delete an insertion by the despot that if the Germans attacked, Soviet commanders were to attempt to meet them, to settle any conflict. Still, the document made clear that the military was to prepare for war while doing everything possible to avoid it.

Soviet commanders up and down the frontier were hosting performances, as they generally did on Saturday nights. In Minsk, 150 miles east of the border, the officers’ club put on The Wedding at Malinovka, a Soviet comic operetta about a village in the Ukrainian steppes during the civil war. The venue was packed. Attendees included the commander of the critical Western Military District, Dmitry Pavlov; his chief of staff; and his deputies. Six German aircraft had crossed the frontier in Pavlov’s region on a recent night. “Never mind. More self-control. I know, it has already been reported! More self-control!” Pavlov was overheard saying on the phone about reports of German actions. As soon as Pavlov put the receiver down and prepared to greet a visitor, the phone rang again. “I know; it has been reported,” Pavlov was heard to say. “I know. Those at the top know better than us. That’s all.” He slammed down the phone. During the operetta, Pavlov was interrupted in his box by a new report of unusual activity: the Germans had
removed the barbed wire from their side of the border, and the sound of motors had grown louder, even at a distance. An uninterrupted flow of German mechanized columns was moving forward. Pavlov remained at the show.

Around midnight, the commander of the Kiev Military District called the defense commissariat to report that another German had crossed the border, claiming that Wehrmacht soldiers had taken up their firing positions, with tanks at their start lines. Some 12 hours earlier, at 1:00 PM, Germany's high command had transmitted the password for war, “Dortmund.” That afternoon, Hitler had composed letters explaining his decision to attack the Soviet Union to the leaders of Nazi-allied states. Hitler’s adjutant Nicolaus von Below noticed that the führer was “increasingly nervous and restless. Hitler talked a lot, walked up and down; he seemed impatient, waiting for something.” In his residence in the old Reich Chancellery, Hitler did not sleep for a second straight night. He took a meal in the dining room. He listened to Les Préludes, the symphonic poem by Franz Liszt. He summoned Goebbels, who had just finished watching Gone With the Wind. The two walked up and down Hitler’s drawing room for quite a while, finalizing the timing and content of Hitler’s war proclamation for the next day, which would focus on “the salvation of Europe” and the intolerable danger of waiting any longer. Goebbels left at 2:30 AM, returning to the Propaganda Ministry, where staff had been told to await him. “Everyone was absolutely astonished,” he wrote in his diary, “even though most had guessed half of what was going on, and some all of it.” The Germans had given the invasion the code name Operation Barbarossa. Now, it had begun.

Most of the intended recipients in Soviet frontline positions failed to receive Directive Number 1. Wehrmacht advance units, many disguised in Red Army uniforms, had already crossed the border and sabotaged Soviet communications. “The beginning of every war is like opening the door into a dark room,” Hitler had told one of his private secretaries. “One never knows what is hidden in the darkness.”
BLINDED BY THE MIGHT

Stalin’s regime had reproduced a deep-set pattern in Russian history: Russian rulers launching forced modernizations to overcome or at least manage the asymmetry of a country that considered itself a providential power with a special mission in the world but that substantially lagged behind the other great powers. The urgent quest for a strong state had culminated, once more, in personal rule. Stalin’s regime defined the terms of public thought and individual identity, and Stalin himself personified the passions and dreams of a socialist modernity and Soviet might. With single-sentence telegrams or brief phone calls, he could spur the clunky Soviet party-state machinery into action, invoking discipline and intimidation, to be sure, but also galvanizing young functionaries who felt close emotional ties to him and millions more who would never come close to meeting him in person.

Stalin’s regime promised not merely statist modernization but also the transcendence of private property and markets, of class antagonisms and existential alienation—a renewal of the social whole rent by the bourgeoisie, a quest for social justice on a global scale. In worldview and practice, it was a conspiracy that perceived conspiracy everywhere and in everything, constantly gaslighting itself. In administration, it constituted a crusade for planning and control that ended up generating a proliferation of improvised illegalities, a perverse drive for order, and a system in which propaganda and myths about “the system” were the most systematized part. Amid the cultivated opacity and patent falsehoods, even most high officials were reduced to Kremlinology.
The fanatical hypercentralization was often self-defeating, but the cult of the party’s and especially Stalin’s infallibility proved to be the most dangerous flaw of Stalin’s fallible rule.

By inclination, Stalin was a Russian nationalist in the imperial sense, and anti-Westernism was the core impulse of this long-standing Russian-Eurasian political culture. Initially, the ambitious Soviet quest to match the West had actually increased the country’s dependency on Western technology and know-how. But after importing technology from every advanced Western economy, Stalin’s regime went on to develop its own sophisticated military and related industries to a degree unprecedented for even a military-first country. Geopolitically, however, whereas tsarist Russia had concluded foreign alliances for its security, the Soviet Union mostly sought, or could manage, only nonaggression pacts. Its sole formal alliance, formed with France, lacked any military dimension. The country’s self-isolation became ever more extreme.

Stalin insisted on calling fascism “reactionary,” a supposed way for the bourgeoisie to preserve the old world. But Hitler turned out to be someone neither Marx nor Lenin had prepared Stalin for. A lifelong Germanophile, Stalin appears to have been mesmerized by the might and daring of Germany’s parallel totalitarian regime. For a time, he recovered his personal and political equilibrium in his miraculous pact with Hitler, which deflected the German war machine, delivered a bounty of German industrial tools, enabled the conquest and Sovietization of tsarist borderlands, and reinserted the Soviet Union into the role of arbitrating world affairs. Hitler had whetted and, reluctantly, abetted Stalin’s own appetite. But far earlier than the despot imagined, his ability to extract profit from the immense danger Hitler posed to Europe and the world had run its course. This generated unbearable tension in Stalin’s life and rule, yet he stubbornly refused to come to grips with the new realities, and not solely out of greed for German technology. Despite his insight into the human psyche, demonic shrewdness, and sharp mind, Stalin was blinkered by ideology and fixed ideas. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill controlled not a single division on the Soviet frontier, yet Stalin remained absolutely obsessed with British imperialism, railing against the Treaty of Versailles long after Hitler had shredded it and continuing to imagine that Hitler was negotiating with the British behind his back.

HITLER’S CHOICE

For Hitler, the 1939 pact had been a distasteful necessity that, with luck, would not endure very long. His racial, social Darwinist, zero-sum understanding of geopolitics meant that both the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom would have to be annihilated in order for Germany to realize its master-race destiny. To be sure, in the immediate term, he thought in terms of domination of the European continent (Grossmacht), which required Lebensraum—living space—in the east. But in the longer term, he foresaw domination of the world (Weltmacht), which would require a blue-water fleet, bases rimming the Atlantic, and a colonial empire in the tropics for raw materials. That was incompatible with the continued existence of the British Empire, at least in the form it took at that time. Hitler thus put himself in front of a stark choice of either agreeing to deepen the pact with Stalin and taking on the entire British Empire, which would mean conceding at least a partial Soviet sphere in the Balkans and on the Black Sea—on top of the Soviet sphere in the Baltics—or, alternatively, freeing himself from the infuriating dependency on Moscow and taking on the British later. In the end, military circumstances helped determine the sequencing: Hitler did not possess the air or naval capabilities or the depth of resources to prevail militarily over the United Kingdom; he did have the land forces to attempt to smash the Soviet Union.
A commitment to a prolonged contest for supremacy with the British, whom Hitler expected to be aided more and more by the vast resources of the United States, made quick annihilation of the Soviet Union an absolutely necessary prelude. Moreover, even though Hitler and the German high command knew that the Soviet Union was not poised to attack, the invasion amounted to a preventive war all the same in his logic, for the Soviet Union was only getting stronger and might itself attack at a time it deemed more advantageous. And so in 1940, while pushing Japan to attack British positions in East Asia, Hitler had offered the British government a version of the pact he had concluded with Stalin and seemed dumbfounded when the British government did not accept it. The Nazi leader had grasped the British imperial mindset, and he was sincere when promising that, in exchange for a free hand on the continent, he would keep the British Empire intact for now. He continued to hold out hope that the United Kingdom, patently weak militarily on land and therefore unable to defeat him, would come to terms with him. But Hitler had failed to understand the long-standing British preference for a balance of power on the continent (on which the security of the empire, too, partly depended). And he perceived far more common interests between London and Moscow than either of them saw themselves.

*Hitler turned out to be someone neither Marx nor Lenin had prepared Stalin for.*

During the preparations for the blitzkrieg against the Soviets, Hitler continued to devote resources to preparing for a long naval and air war against the British and the United States. May and June of 1941 was the blackest period yet for the United Kingdom: Germany was sinking its ships and bombing its cities, and it had lost its position in the Balkans. After German paratroopers had captured Crete, in late May 1941, the British position seemed grievously imperiled. Eleven days before the scheduled launch of his Soviet invasion, Hitler had dictated a draft of Directive Number 32, “Preparations for the Time after Barbarossa.” It envisioned the subdivision and exploitation of Soviet territories, as well as a pincer movement against the Suez Canal and British positions in the Middle East; the conquest of Gibraltar, northwestern Africa, and the Spanish and Portuguese Atlantic islands, to eliminate the British in the Mediterranean; and the building of coastal bases in West and possibly East Africa. Eventually, there would need to be a German base in Afghanistan for seizing British India.

Had Hitler thrown all his might into this “peripheral strategy” rather than invading the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom might not have survived. The war with the Soviets would have gone ahead at some point, but with the British knocked out of the picture. There would have been no British beachhead to assist an eventual U.S.-led Allied landing in western Europe.

**THE WISDOM OF BISMARCK**

Hitler cannot be explained in terms of his social origins or his early life and influences, a point that is no less applicable to Stalin. The greatest shaper of Stalin’s identity was the building and running of a dictatorship, whereby he assumed responsibility for the Soviet Union’s power in the world. In the name of socialism, Stalin, pacing in his Kremlin office, had grown accustomed to moving millions of peasants, workers—whole nations—across a sixth of the earth, on his own initiative, often consulting no one. But his world had become intensely constricted. Hitler had trapped the Soviet despot in his Little Corner.
Stalin’s dealings with Hitler differed from British appeasement in that Stalin tried deterrence as well as accommodation. But Stalin’s policy resembled British appeasement in that he was driven by a blinding desire to avoid war at all costs. He displayed strength of capabilities but not of will. Neither his fearsome resolve nor his supreme cunning—which had enabled him to vanquish his rivals and spiritually crush his inner circle—was in evidence in 1941. He shrank from trying to preempt Hitler militarily and failed to preempt him diplomatically.

In the end, however, the question of who most miscalculated is not a simple one. “Of all the men who can lay claim to having paved the way” for the Third Reich, Hitler liked to say, “one figure stands in awe-inspiring solitude: Bismarck.” But Bismarck had built his chancellorship on avoiding conflict with Russia. When a bust of Bismarck was transferred from the old Reich Chancellery to Hitler’s new Reich Chancellery, it had broken off at the neck. A replica was hastily made and artificially aged by soaking it in cold tea. No one shared this omen with Hitler.