IN LITTLE MORE than the last ten years, perceptions of the Soviet-German war, formerly known as the ‘Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union 1941-1945’, have been dramatically transformed both in Russia and in the West. Before this, decades had to pass before it was possible to establish a wholly reliable operational narrative of the war in the east. Much time and energy was taken up by historians in countering the preponderance of German documentation and interpretation. Conversely, the suffocating blanket of the ‘heroic myth’ overlaid by Soviet propaganda on Soviet wartime behaviour proved to be as misleading and cloaking, as it was in most instances impenetrable.

That same calculated obfuscation, equally prolonged and governed by the vagaries of internal politics, ‘de-Stalinisation’ and ‘re-Stalinisation’, reduced the catastrophe of the initial German onslaught of June 22nd, 1941, to a bizarre conundrum of ‘when is a surprise not a surprise?’. Little wonder that much Soviet historiography was either discounted or ignored, but unfortunately along with it, the rare nugget of documentary gold was hidden.

Given the accomplishments of post-Soviet and Western historiography over the past decade, it is no longer appropriate to describe the ‘Great Patriotic War’ as the ‘unknown war’. It has not been so for some time; indeed, presenting its epic battles is currently high literary fashion plus the domain of film and television, particularly the latter, recently with BBC Timewatch’s War of the Century. In this context some might argue that we risk substituting one set of myths for another. Whatever the drama and the variety of its presentation to a wider public, the

A German tank rolls over a Russian trench during the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941.
the role of Stalin and his entourage, and investigate the basis of his foreign policy and 'military-strategic' decisions. They attempted to uncover the causes of the catastrophic outcome of the 'initial period' of the war when the 'invincible' Red Army went down to death and defeat. The declassification of hitherto secret strategic plans for Red Army deployment covering 1940-41 – in particular, the May 1941 document outlining a Red Army pre-emptive strike against German concentrations in the east – provided greater cogency to these investigations of Stalin's military-political attitude and outlook. It took considerable time for that document to appear in print. Work that signalled a radical departure, drawing extensively on archives, was the analysis of Soviet propaganda directives, inquiry into the emphasis on 'offensivism' and the importance of Stalin's major speech of May 5th, 1941, publicly available for the first time as a complete, authentic text.

This 'relatively peaceful discussion', as the Russian historians described it, prompted by the limited release of archival materials dealing with the crisis of 1941, was rudely interrupted in 1992 by the appearance in Russia of a literary bombshell, Viktor Suvorov's 'nonfantastical tale' Ledokhod, previously published in English (though with much less impact) as Icebreaker: Who Started the Second World War? in 1990. V. Rezun, better known as Suvorov, had earlier defected to the UK from Soviet Military Intelligence, the GRU, subsequently embarking on a literary career. An instant best-seller in Russia, the book divided both the academic community and the Russian public at large. Suvorov's succes de scandale turned official, received wisdom on its head, arguing that it was Stalin who intended to attack in 1941 (on July 6th, to be precise), and that what Hitler launched against Russia in June 1941 was a 'preventive war' designed to forestall Stalin. At the very least, Suvorov went a long way to relieve Nazi Germany of a significant portion of responsibility for bringing about the Soviet-German war.

A preliminary version of Suvorov's thesis had appeared in Britain as early as 1985 in the June issue of the Royal United Services Journal, only to be rebutted immediately by Gabriel Gorodetsky of Tel Aviv University in the same journal. The book that followed is a skillful and highly plausible piece of work. It utilised a wide range of Soviet military memoirs and open-access military publications, giving it more than a patina of respectability, conveying the impression (but not the substance) of drawing on actual archives. The underlying thesis is deliberately sensational. Suvorov asserted that, like Hitler, Stalin was bent on world domination – his chosen method, the transformation of the Second World War into a revolutionary war. It was Hitler who acted as the 'icebreaker for the revolution', clearing the way for Stalin's 'war of liberation' in Europe and ultimately the world. Hitler's vanquishing of the Western democracies suited Stalin perfectly. Hitler's criminality conferred yet another boon, permitting Stalin to assume the moral mantle of 'liberator of Europe' at the appropriate time.

If the reaction to Icebreaker in Anglo-American historical circles was tepid, the response to the German edition, Der Eisbrecher: Hitler in Stalins Kalte, published in Stuttgart in 1989, caused a minor sensation, a forerunner of what would take place in Russia. A number of German historians avidly seized on the 'red herring' – in a literal and figurative

Timoshenko (with cigarette) and Zhukov (holding paper) inspect field exercises in the Kiev region in the autumn of 1940.
Suvorov sensationaly argued that Stalin saw Hitler as a stepping-stone – or ‘icebreaker’ – to ensuring Soviet participation in a war that would result in Soviet world domination.

The resurrection and revitalisation of this version of events, first elaborated by Joseph Goebbels in June 1941, came at a singular juncture in the highly charged debate on how to deal with German history and the period of National Socialism. If indeed there was substance to Stalin’s aggressive plan to ‘liberate’ Western Europe, then Hitler’s decision to invade Russia should no longer be regarded as in terms of strategic folly, ideological compulsion or naked aggression, but rather as a justifiable preventative attack to deflect not only a threat to Germany, but to Western civilisation at large.

The story grew with the telling, engendering a historiography all of its own. Ernst Topitsch’s Stalin’s War, (1987) a ‘radical new theory of the Second World War’, argued that the war was essentially a Soviet attack on the Western democracies. R.C. Raack’s Stalin’s Drive to the West 1938-1945 (1995) attributed to Stalin a plan for war in Europe which preceded Hitler’s aggressive designs. But protracted war, exhausting the participants and fomenting proletarian revolution, did not ensue. France collapsed precipitately, Hitler turned east and caught Stalin unprepared, having neglected Soviet defences in favour of preparations for attack.

Conversely ‘The Attack on the Soviet Union’, Volume IV of Germany and the Second World War (English-language edition 1998), made short shrift of this insistence on Soviet offensive intention. For the concept of ‘preventative war’ to stick, it had to be demonstrated that Germany was being directly threatened by the Red Army. The German high command was aware of the Red Army’s capability, and even disparaged it, but there was little evidence to support the thesis of German fear of Soviet offensive intent. As late as June 1941, Colonel-General Halder described Soviet deployment as ‘rein defensiv’, dismissing the idea of any major Red Army offensive as ‘nonsense’. He was even sceptical of Hitler’s concern about a Soviet thrust towards the Romanian oil fields. What really concerned Hitler was not Soviet aggression, but Soviet concessions to Germany, which could frustrate his own grand design, depriving him of a pretext to attack.

In Germany, Icebreaker revived and energised a long-standing controversy about responsibility for the Soviet-German war, providing those who sought it with the convenient alibi that Stalin and his circle were responsible for the war. The effect of this in Russia, coupled with the collapse of the Soviet Union, was to pose a direct challenge to fifty years of the ‘official’ Soviet version of the Great Patriotic War, carefully cleansed and riddled with ‘blank spots’, of which the most blatant obscured the immediate pre-war period, the Nazi-Soviet Pact and the military catastrophe of June 1941. Suvorov added fuel to the fire with a further volume, M-Day (1994), enlarging on his original argument, by which time a furious controversy

Red Army soldiers train to shoot at enemy aircraft in January 1941.
was raging in Russia, with the question ‘Did Stalin plan offensive war against Hitler’? at its heart.

Generous spirits might accord a degree of credibility to Suvorov’s interpretation of Stalin’s strategic design before June 1940, but the fall of France wrought havoc with the Soviet leader’s plans and equally demolishes Suvorov’s theory of his intent. ‘The Germans will now turn on us, they will eat us alive’ was Stalin’s frantic comment. There was no longer any prospect of protracted war in the west leading to the mutual exhaustion of the belligerents, no royal road to a revolutionary Europe. Germany was no longer tied down in the west. The situation now brought Russia face to face with Germany.

Recent releases from the archives and declassification of key documents have made it possible to trace exactly what ‘strategic design’ did materialise in Russia, as opposed to an idea based on conjecture or invention. Between 1928 and 1941, seven major operational war plans were drafted, complete with fifteen reviews and revisions. These were drafted in great secrecy by the General Staff, the Chief of the General Staff, Deputy Chief of the General Staff Operations Directorate, together with the Defence Commissar, Stalin and Molotov. But what Marshal Timoshenko discovered, on succeeding Marshal Voroshilov as Defence Commissar in 1940, was not only an army unfit to fight, but also one lacking an updated war plan, the most recent dating back to March 1938. This plan, drawn up by Marshal Shaposhnikov, was predicated on a European war fought on two fronts: in the east and west. It pre-supposed that any main German attack would develop from north of the Pripyat marshes and the forces concentrated in East Prussia and north of Warsaw.

The revision ordered in July 1940 was conducted by Major-General Vasilevskii, supervised by Shaposhnikov. It reaffirmed the location of the main German thrust north of the river San, and the lesser likelihood of a main attack materialising from the southern Poland towards Kiev. The undue emphasis on the area north of Warsaw and East Prussia was immediately opposed by Timoshenko. Why not concentrate on a route south of Warsaw into the Ukraine? On August 16th, 1940, the revision went further, under a new Chief of Staff, General Meretskov. After completing its deployment in less than two weeks, the Red Army would unleash a powerful counter-blow, carrying operations on to enemy (German) territory. The plan set out two variants: deployment either north or south of Brest. On October 5th, the revised revision (completed on September 21st, 1940) was submitted to Stalin, who in turn urged the General Staff to ‘reconsider’. He believed that Germany needed Ukrainian grain and Donbas coal to wage protracted war, therefore it was most likely that Hitler would launch his main attack in the south-west.

This ‘revision’ affirmed the primacy of the south-western theatre, embodied the principle of the ‘counter-blow’ (svarovizni utar) and assumed that only part of the forces would be initially engaged, allowing time for the Red Army to concentrate before launching a decisive counter-offensive. This preoccupation with the south-western theatre, concentration on the Kiev Special Military District, Timoshenko’s and latterly Zhukov’s military bailiwick, proved to be the root cause of the subsequent massive Soviet strategic maldeployment. Neither the new war plan, nor the deliberations within the special command conference convened in December 1940 made any mention of surprise as a factor to be reckoned with.

The records of the conference proceedings do not reveal any assessment of the critical ‘initial period’ of operation, nor any analysis of German blitzkrieg experience. Timoshenko having asserted that the Red Army had nothing to learn from it. General Klenov, who introduced the subject of ‘a special type of offensive operation in the initial phase of a war’ – a pre-emptive, preventative blow? – was heard in hushed silence.

A critically important link in the evolution of Soviet war planning and operational preparation came with two-part ‘Red versus Blue’ strategic wargames conducted during the first week of January 1941. We now have a detailed record of these wargames, planned as early as October 1940 and designed to test the revised war plan. Generals Pavlov and Zhukov played alternatively attacker and defender. The first game in the northern theatre demonstrated that terrain and fortifications in East Prussia would make any Soviet
'counter-offensive' there a protracted undertaking. In the south-western theatre Zhukov produced a brilliantly successful 'counter-offensive' which appeared to confirm the argument that this theatre should receive priority reinforcement. Stalin was not impressed. He accepted the likelihood of frontier battles, but criticised the execution of the 'retaliatory blow'. 'Who won?' Stalin got no clear reply. Meretskov was dismissed forthwith as Chief of the General Staff to be replaced by Zhukov. However, Stalin had grasped that the Red Army was in no condition to conduct major offensive operations.

The command conference virtually ignored defence, and the war games assumed a scenario unrelated to real German war plans and the location of the main attack in the north. Soviet war planning was not tested. Surprise played no part. It was, observed Marshal Voronov, as if the Soviet Union was preparing for 1914, not 1941. General Zhukov's updated war plan of March 11th, 1941, confirmed the primacy of the south-western arena at a time when Soviet intelligence reported increased German traffic eastwards. The 'updated plan' identified the main German force concentrated to attack along the Berdichiv-Kiev axis to occupy the Ukraine. A German concentration on the 'Warsaw axis' could not, however, be excluded. As for potential Soviet operations aimed at Berlin and Vienna, Stalin said 'We must think this over', meaning that no decision was taken. The 'update' rested on two crucial assumptions. The first was that German forces would deploy on the frontier ten to fifteen days after concentrating. Secondly, the Red Army would take the offensive but only after successfully repelling an enemy attack and the main force would be engaged only some days after the frontier battles.

Meanwhile, operational plans and mobilisation timetables had already slipped out of alignment. Instructions for a fresh mobilisation plan had been issued on August 16th, 1940. 'Mobilisation Plan – 41' (MP-41) had been drafted by Major-General Vasilevskii in January, and approved in February but a revision was ordered by the General Staff. The new plan was to be ready by May 1st, 1941, but this was deferred. In some sectors the readiness date was extended to July 20th. Full implementation would be effected during the initial stages of hostilities. But what the planners were discovering was that five years would be needed to carry through full Red Army modernisation. Shortage of manpower and weapons, logistical difficulties and insufficient transport badly impeded present programmes. In June 1941 the plan was incomplete, mobilisation plans at military district level unfinished. Above all, no plan existed to bring all units to full readiness.

Most importantly, General Staff operational documents, those for the 'covering armies on the frontiers and those for the second echelon (of which 'Suvorov' had made great play, the 'secret offensive army'), did not include offensive operations 'against neighbouring states'. None was contemplated. General Staff directives stipulated frontier defence to cover Red Army mobilisation, concentration and deployment. On May 5th, 1941, Stalin made his famous speech to military academy graduates. The text, now available for all to see, does not support previous contentions that this was a summons to aggressive war against Germany. Stalin intended to counter impressions of Red Army weakness, counter German over-confidence in the Wehrmacht and bolster army morale should war materialise. The subsequent shift in propaganda did not reflect advocacy.

The distribution of the opposing forces in July 1941. Stalin expected the main invasion to happen in the south.
of ‘revolutionary war’, rather than the discharge of the Red Army’s ‘international tasks’ in the context of defence of the Soviet Union. It also replaced a sceptic ‘pacifist’ orientation with ‘offensive spirit’, revitalised patriotism and promoted ‘vigilance’.

Propaganda zigzag both unnerved and reassured the populace and confused the army at a time of intense crisis, with the appearance of a manifest threat, its execution seemingly imminent. On May 5th Soviet military intelligence reported on the German order of battle: 103-107 German divisions (more to come) concentrated in the east, facing the Soviet Union. This did grave damage to Stalin’s strategy of presently deterring, and hopefully deferring, war. For Zhukov and the General Staff, the report destroyed their entire concept of war. The import of the latest intelligence was devastating. There would be no ‘initial engagements’, no two weeks in which to mobilise, concentrate and deploy. The Wehrmacht was fully mobilised, rear services organised, positioned to pre-empt Red Army deployment, poised for surprise attack.

The problem now was how to disrupt an inevitable and well-nigh imminent German attack. To deny the Germans the initiative, it was vital to ‘pre-empt’ (u预备) German deployment and attack to deny the enemy the possibility of forming a coherent front, of coordinating separate arms. This was the basis of a highly controversial document dated May 15th, ‘Considerations on plans for the strategic deployment of Soviet armed forces in the event of war with Germany and its allies’. It was marked ‘Absolutely secret’, one copy only, signed by Timoshenko and Zhukov. The aim of the plan was a pre-emptive offensive operation by 152 Soviet divisions to destroy 100 German divisions. The first strategic objective was the destruction of German forces south of Brest, the second objective an attack in the centre and north-west to capture Poland and East Prussia.

It was clear to Zhukov, and presumably Stalin to whom the plan was submitted, that current Soviet deployments on May 15th were insufficient for this offensive. The western and south-western fronts could only muster 102 divisions. Movements of second echelon elements and reserves would only be completed in June-July. To establish the requisite ‘correlation of forces’ would require 60 days, by which time German strength would have increased still further. The Red Army was in no condition to launch a strategic offensive on this scale. The moment of truth had arrived for the General Staff and the Red Army: either launch a pre-emptive attack, or order general mobilisation.

In the event Stalin sanctioned neither. As a result the Red Army could neither attack nor defend. Mindful of the precedent of 1914, when mobilisation triggered war, Stalin ruled out mobilisation and refused to authorise increased readiness. The plan of May 15th was possibly designed to impress him with the urgency of the situation, a plea for increased readiness. But it was essentially what the Red Army went hatingly to war with in June, based on a maldeployment dating back to October 1940 and the strategic design founded in the January 1941 war games. Three initial directives dated June 22nd-23rd prescribed ‘counterblow’ objectives culled from the war games. Stalin had neither the intention nor the capability to embark on ‘preventive war’. His ‘war avoidance strategy’ ruled out a pre-emptive strike, and even mitigated against timely defensive moves lest they be construed as ‘provocations’.

But what of Stalin himself and his strategy? It is only in the past decade that a serious revision of what might be called accepted interpretations of Stalin’s policies on the eve of the war has occurred. That these ‘standard interpretations’ have persisted is due, in Professor Gorodetsky’s view, to ‘the almost total absence of evidence of Stalin’s intentions’. The scant evidence which did exist was largely exploited to place the major responsibility for the disaster of 1941 at his door. It is no longer a case of scant evidence. Gorodetsky, author of The Icebreaker Myth (published in Moscow in 1995) was able to conduct a ‘thorough scrutiny’ of Soviet archives, the Foreign Ministry, the
Two dead Red Army soldiers by their machine gun: the lightly armed frontier guards suffered devastating losses.

General Staff and intelligence materials. The fresh evidence is impressive, the conclusions arresting. No longer was Stalin the devious plotter or the ‘outwitted bungler’. This is a rational Stalin, a geopolitical operator, interested in negotiating for European peace, but his presumption of being a possible arbiter seduced him from awareness of the German threat. A miscarriage of the political scene, coupled with his near paranoid suspicion of the British, led him to discount his own intelligence reports: but, worse, military errors impelled him to adopt a policy of outright appeasement towards Germany, which led inevitably towards disaster.

Gorodetsky considers Stalin’s policy to have been ‘rational and level-headed’, his mentor in foreign policy Machiavelli. But perhaps ‘the single most significant factor’ in bringing about the calamity of 1941 was Stalin’s failure to consider what could follow if appeasement and warding off suspected, supposed ‘provocations’ completely failed. In that event Stalin had left the margins too close to call, reality was upon him in the shape of full-blooded, war-waging, murderously destructive Operation Barbarossa, the threat he had hoped to parry or parley away. The Soviet Union had to bear the terrible cost of Stalin’s dogged, obstinate pursuit of what became self-disarming mechanisms of which the final fatal instance was dismissing, discounting the imminence of war. The ‘Suvorov’ fantasies, fictions and inventions do not bear comparison with a horrendous reality.

FOR FURTHER READING
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