



GILES MILTON

THE STALIN AFFAIR

**THE IMPOSSIBLE ALLIANCE
THAT WON THE WAR**

The Stalin Affair

The Impossible Alliance That Won the War

Giles Milton

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[Begin Reading](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Photos](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

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For my late mother, Jo.

*There is only one thing worse than fighting with allies, and that is
fighting without them!*

—Winston Churchill, 1944

Author's Note

This is a true story. Anything enclosed in quotation marks is reported dialogue, any description of daily life is taken from letters, diaries, and memoirs. Many of these accounts were hastily written and never intended for publication. I have standardized spelling and rectified grammar to make them easier to read. References to the original documents can be found in the endnotes.

I have also spelled out most (but not all) acronyms and abbreviations: thus FO becomes Foreign Office and ACK becomes Archibald Clark Kerr. But some, like NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, precursor to the KGB), remain as acronyms. And PM, as most British readers will know, means prime minister. There is little consistency to my method: my objective has been clarity.

Likewise with the transliteration of Russian names. I have used the preferred spelling of the British and Americans living in Moscow during the war and have followed the same rule for place-names. Thus Arkhangelsk is Archangel, as it always was in the 1940s.

One of the principal characters in this book, Archibald Clark Kerr, insisted that everyone should call him Archie, a most unusual break from diplomatic convention. I have followed his wish and extended this informality to the other main characters as well. There is good reason for doing so: Kathleen Harriman was known to everyone as Kathy, and her father, Averell Harriman, was always Averell, or Ave.

Stalin, however, must remain as Stalin. He was not amused when told that his nickname was Uncle Joe.

Prelude

Midsummer Night, 1941

It was the shortest night of the year.

The sky to the west was still streaked with light, but in the Soviet borderlands, which stretched from the Baltic to the Black Sea, it was finally dark. The waning moon appeared as no more than a faint glance of silver.

Along the entire Soviet frontier, eighteen hundred miles in length, the greatest army in history was crouched in the shadows. Infantry, gunners, drivers, mechanics; all were watching and waiting. More than three million battle-hardened troops of the German Wehrmacht were on the highest alert, having just received news that Operation Barbarossa was to be launched that very night. The Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union was poised to begin.

Those three million soldiers were in the vanguard of a vast mechanized army that had already steamrolled across Europe. Poland, Norway, Denmark, Belgium, the Low Countries, and France—all had been crushed by the Nazis. Now the Wehrmacht was to take on its most formidable enemy to date, Stalin's Red Army. Hitler and his generals were confident of success, for their invading force included 3,350 tanks, 2,770 aircraft, and 7,184 artillery pieces, as well as six hundred thousand trucks and six hundred thousand horses. No fewer than 148 divisions had been assembled into three gigantic army groups designated North, Centre, and South. They were to thrust deep into Soviet territory with the aim of capturing Leningrad, Moscow, and Soviet Ukraine. Hitler was determined to triumph where Napoleon and his Grande Armée had so spectacularly failed.

In the early hours of Sunday, June 22, 1941, German artillery troops began removing the camouflage netting from their guns and dragging them from their shelters. Soldiers synchronized their watches, whispered last-minute instructions. In Army Group Centre, they checked the waterproof screens on tanks that were to ford the River Bug. It was 2 a.m. German time, and the air was heavy with suspense. Within the hour, the panzers would fire their engines, belching diesel fumes into the night sky.

On the Soviet side of the frontier all was quiet. In scores of villages, farmers, workers, and housewives had long since taken to their beds, unaware that their lives were about to be turned upside down. Similarly unprepared were the Red Army border guards. Most lacked weaponry. All lacked information.

Just a few weeks earlier, Hitler had warned his generals that Operation Barbarossa would require a wholly new form of warfare in which brutality was to be a weapon of war. "This is a war of extermination," he said. "Commanders must be prepared to sacrifice their personal scruples."¹ Captured Soviet officers, saboteurs, and partisans were to be summarily shot, along with hundreds of thousands of Jews. Entire populations were to be liquidated, in order that

Germans could have more “lebensraum,” or living space. No less malign was the führer’s “Hunger Plan,” which would be used to starve to death millions of Soviet citizens.

Hitler was confident of a rapid victory. “We will only have to kick in the door,” he said, “and the whole rotten edifice will come crashing down.”² He expected triumphant German troops to be parading through Moscow within months, if not weeks.

The führer had laid the groundwork for victory earlier that spring, luring Bulgaria, Romania, and Yugoslavia into his camp. When the pro-Nazi government of Yugoslavia had been overthrown in a pro-Western military coup—an unexpected setback —Hitler had invaded the country and forced Belgrade’s capitulation in just ten days. Now, with Western, Central, and Eastern Europe under his thumb, the path was open for his greatest victory of all. Great Britain alone had the potential to upset his plans, but she was in grave peril that summer. Hitler’s U-boats were sinking British ships at a faster rate than they could be replaced.

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TWO YEARS EARLIER, in the summer of 1939, Hitler and Stalin had stunned the world by signing a formal treaty of friendship. After much behind-the-scenes negotiation, it was announced that their long-standing enmity had been overcome and the two dictators were now allies. Political leaders in Europe and America waited aghast to see what would happen next.

They didn’t have to wait long, for the consequences of the Nazi-Soviet Pact* became apparent within weeks. One of its secret clauses divided Poland into two halves, with the western half to be swallowed by Nazi Germany and the eastern half by the Soviet Union. On September 1, 1939, the führer had invaded western Poland, leading Britain and France to declare war on Germany. This marked the beginning of the Second World War.

Three weeks later, Stalin had sent his Red Army into eastern Poland, an occupation followed by mass killings of politicians, intellectuals, and army officers. Over the months that followed, once-independent countries were gobbled wholesale by Germany and the Soviet Union.

The Red Army occupied the three Baltic states and attacked Finland; the Wehrmacht swept into Denmark and Norway in April 1940. This was followed by Hitler’s blitzkrieg invasion of France, Belgium, and the Low Countries. Throughout these long months, the führer’s alliance with Stalin underpinned his every move.

But by June 1941, the Nazi-Soviet Pact was increasingly fragile, and there were countless signs that Hitler was preparing to betray his erstwhile ally. Stalin refused to believe these signs. He turned a blind eye to Luftwaffe reconnaissance flights over Soviet territory and dismissed intelligence from a Communist sympathizer in the German Air Ministry. “Tell the source in the staff of the German Air Force to fuck his mother!” was Stalin’s response. “This is no source, but a disinformant.”³ He even discounted highly accurate intelligence from Richard Sorge, a Soviet agent working inside the German embassy in Tokyo.

When Moscow’s British ambassador, Sir Stafford Cripps, issued his own warning—one that came directly from Winston Churchill—Stalin dismissed it as *angliiskaya provokatsiya*. He despised the British prime minister and was convinced he was trying to goad the Soviet Union into a war with Hitler.

Stalin’s foreign commissar, Vyacheslav Molotov, was sufficiently disquieted by the rumors to summon to the Kremlin the German ambassador, Count Friedrich-Werner von der Schulenburg. He asked Schulenburg if it was true that all the embassy wives had been repatriated to Berlin.

“Not *all* the women,” said the ambassador disingenuously. “My wife is still in town.”⁴

The starkest warning came on the eve of the invasion when a German deserter named Arthur Liskov crossed the border and told Soviet border guards that the assault directive had just been issued to his unit. Operation Barbarossa was to begin at 4 a.m. This news was flashed to Stalin, who ordered Liskov to be shot for giving out disinformation. But he was sufficiently alarmed to place his frontier troops on high alert, although this order came with a caveat: “The task of our forces is to refrain from any kind of provocative action.”⁵

Stalin spent that midsummer evening at his dacha in Kuntsevo, six miles from Moscow, with a small entourage of generals and advisors. At eleven o’clock, they moved to the upstairs dining room. “Stalin kept reassuring us that Hitler would not begin the war,”⁶ recalled one of those present. Even now, the Soviet leader refused to believe the intelligence.

At around two in the morning, his guests returned to their Kremlin apartments. An hour or so later, Stalin himself retired to bed.

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AT PRECISELY 3:15 that morning, Sunday, June 22, a thunderous artillery barrage shattered the silence as thousands of German guns opened up along the eighteen-hundred-mile front line. A Luftwaffe aerial armada simultaneously passed over the frontier: its mission was to wreak destruction on Soviet airfields and defensive positions.

Over the previous days, German reconnaissance planes had mapped every strategic target, including bridges, command posts, railway junctions, and power plants. Now, with clinical precision, Hitler’s pilots rained havoc on the infrastructure below. They undertook their destruction with swagger, dive-bombing Soviet airfields in their nimble Stukas. Five hundred bombers, 270 dive bombers, and 480 fighter aircraft struck sixty-six Soviet bases. Virtually unchallenged, they destroyed more than twelve hundred aircraft. In one stroke, Stalin’s air force had been emasculated.

German special forces were also working behind enemy lines. Disguised in Red Army uniforms, they had been parachuted into key areas and were now cutting telephone lines and communications cables. This paralyzed Soviet command and control centers, causing organizational chaos.

Once the initial artillery bombardment had come to an end, the forward lines of German infantry began crossing the Soviet frontier. The führer had hoped to achieve tactical surprise, and he was entirely successful, for the first wave of Wehrmacht troops steamrolled through the flimsy defenses.

Hitler had long predicted a quick victory. “When Barbarossa commences,” he said, “the world will hold its breath.”⁷ More accurately, the world watched in horrified astonishment as the Red Army collapsed in disarray. Soviet border guards emerged bleary-eyed from their barrack beds that dawn, only to find themselves staring into German gun barrels. Most were shot before they realized the enormity of what was taking place.

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STALIN WAS ASLEEP in Kuntsevo when General Georgy Zhukov called the dacha. A nonchalant NKVD general answered the phone.

“Comrade Stalin is sleeping.”

“Wake him immediately!” shouted Zhukov. “The Germans are bombing our cities.”

A few minutes passed before Stalin himself came to the phone. Zhukov told him the shocking news.

“Did you understand?” he asked.

Silence.

“*Comrade Stalin...?*”⁸

Stalin said nothing. Zhukov could hear him breathing heavily at the other end. His words were only slowly sinking in. When Stalin eventually spoke, he dismissed the assault as a limited act of provocation. Hitler, he said, would not break his treaty of friendship. He nevertheless summoned a crisis meeting of the Politburo, and he also ordered his foreign commissar, Vyacheslav Molotov, to contact the German ambassador.

As it transpired, Molotov had no need to contact the ambassador. Dawn had scarcely broken above Moscow when a stony-faced Count von der Schulenburg could be seen making his way to the Kremlin. It was an unusually early hour for a meeting, but the ambassador bore a message of the utmost gravity.

He had received it from Berlin in the small hours of that morning, at the very moment when the first of the Wehrmacht’s tanks crossed the Soviet frontier. Written by Germany’s foreign minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, the telegram was prefaced by an order addressed to Schulenburg himself. “Please inform Herr Molotov at once that you have an urgent communication to make to him and would therefore like to call on him immediately.”

Ambassador Schulenburg called Molotov’s office and said he needed to speak with the foreign commissar. He then headed directly to the Kremlin. Molotov must surely have expected bad news, for he had already received intelligence about disturbances at the frontier. He was nevertheless stunned as Schulenburg read word for word the contents of the Berlin telegram.

“The Soviet Government has broken its treaties with Germany and is about to attack Germany from the rear, in its struggle for life,” said the ambassador. “The führer has therefore ordered the German armed forces to oppose this threat with all means at their disposal.”

As Schulenburg knew, the Soviet government had not broken its treaties with Germany. Nor was it about to attack Germany. These were outlandish lies on the part of Hitler and Ribbentrop. So was the rest of the telegram, which openly accused the Soviets of hostile intent.

Foreign Commissar Molotov was no stranger to duplicity, yet he seemed genuinely shocked by what he was hearing. For a while he sat in silence. Then he turned to Ambassador Schulenburg and said bitterly, “This is war.”⁹

PART I

Shock Waves

London, Washington, and Moscow June 22, 1941

Winston's Broadcast

Winston Churchill's private secretary John "Jock" Colville was dozing lightly when his telephone rang at 4 a.m. on Sunday, June 22. It was the Foreign Office calling with sensational news. Thousands of Wehrmacht soldiers were pouring across the Soviet frontier, a clear sign that Hitler's long-expected invasion of the Soviet Union had begun.

Colville was under strict instructions not to wake the prime minister unless the British Isles itself was under attack. He therefore waited a couple of hours before knocking on Churchill's bedroom door. The PM's first reaction was "a smile of satisfaction,"¹ for this was the best possible news. Hitler was now fighting a war on two fronts. He then took a snap decision. "Tell the BBC I will broadcast at nine tonight."² Finally, although it was still early, he reached for a celebratory cigar. Life had just changed for the better.

The news grew increasingly dramatic as the morning progressed. A vast wave of German tanks and infantry was advancing eastward, smashing through Soviet defenses. The most urgent question facing Churchill was how to respond.

The answer was not so easy. Many in the prime minister's inner circle felt Joseph Stalin should be abandoned to his fate, arguing that the Soviet dictator was one of the most murderous leaders in history, an absolute ruler with hands drenched in blood. His ruthless economic policies had caused the 1932 famine that left at least five million Ukrainians dead, and he was known to have liquidated many of his loyal commissars in the Great Purge of the late 1930s. Stalin was also a keen supporter of the Comintern, a body established to foment revolution in the Western democracies.

Churchill was sympathetic to the anti-Soviet views of his advisors. He detested the Soviet Union and had spent much of his political career castigating Stalin and his commissars. In one of his more colorful speeches, he described the Soviet regime as "a league of failures, the criminals, the morbid, the deranged and the distraught."³ And it was Churchill who, as minister of war, had sent British troops and munitions to northern Russia in 1919—his doomed attempt to strangle the Bolshevik regime at birth.

But on that June day, the prime minister had to make a pragmatic calculation. Should Britain watch from the sidelines as Hitler's Wehrmacht smashed through the Soviet defenses? Or go to Stalin's rescue in his hour of need? It came down to a simple question: Who was worse, Hitler or Stalin?

Churchill had discussed this very dilemma with Jock Colville on the previous evening while strolling through the garden at Chequers, the prime ministerial retreat. It had been a swelteringly hot day by English standards, with temperatures in the high seventies, and both men had headed

outside to enjoy the first cool of evening. As they walked across to the far side of the lawn, Churchill confessed to Colville that he would “go all out to help Russia” in the event of a Nazi invasion. Colville was surprised, and asked how he could possibly support Stalin when he had openly opposed the Communist regime for years.

Churchill had a ready answer. “I have only one purpose,” he said, “the destruction of Hitler.” Pausing for a moment, he added a characteristically witty afterthought. “If Hitler invaded Hell, I would make at least a favorable reference to the Devil in the House of Commons.”⁴ Colville was so amused that he jotted it down in his diary.

A number of senior officials were staying at Chequers that weekend, including the foreign secretary, Anthony Eden. Joining them for Sunday lunch was Britain’s ambassador to the Soviet Union, Sir Stafford Cripps, who happened to be on a rare visit to England. Churchill loathed Ambassador Cripps, who was teetotal, vegetarian, and an evangelical Christian—a trio of unforgiveable vices.

Worse still, from the prime minister’s perspective, Cripps was a socialist. Indeed it was his radical political outlook that had led to his appointment to Moscow, in the hope he might improve relations between Britain and the Soviet Union. But Cripps never got to see Stalin, nor was he welcome inside the Kremlin. On one occasion, when he repeatedly petitioned to see Foreign Commissar Molotov, he received a terse message from Molotov’s secretary: “Mr Molotov does not *wish* to see the British ambassador.”⁵

Over the previous two years, the Soviet regime had shown no interest in forging closer ties with the British government. It was comprised of hated figures like Winston Churchill, who continually expressed his hostility toward the Soviet Union. Besides, Stalin was assiduously courting Nazi Germany, the dominant power in Europe and the only country that represented a potentially existential threat to the Soviet regime.

When Ambassador Cripps had left Moscow a fortnight earlier, the Soviet regime had expressed its delight at seeing the back of him. The official news agency, TASS, went so far as to declare him *persona non grata*. Cripps’s embassy colleagues assumed he would not be returning.

Now, over Sunday lunch at Chequers, Winston Churchill pressed Cripps for information about Stalin. There was an urgent need to know how the Soviet leader was likely to react to the Nazi invasion. But Cripps knew almost nothing about the Soviet leader, who rarely appeared in public. Stalin held no official post, apart from general secretary of the Communist Party, and never attended state receptions for visiting diplomats. Nor did he receive foreign ambassadors.* Incoming dignitaries presented their credentials to President Mikhail Kalinin, the titular head of state, never to Stalin.

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ALL OF CHURCHILL’S guests agreed on one thing that weekend: without assistance from the West, Stalin’s Red Army would be defeated. And such a defeat would have catastrophic consequences for Great Britain, because Hitler would be able to transfer all his forces from the Eastern Front to the Western, making the future liberation of occupied Europe all but impossible.

Winston Churchill always had a gift of seeing the big picture, and he saw it right now. Both Britain and the Soviet Union had been attacked by Hitler, and this turned them into *de facto* allies in the great struggle. To the dismay of many in his inner circle, he told them of his resolve

to go to Stalin's aid.

It took him the rest of the day to write the script for his BBC broadcast, aware that he would be selling a tough nut to a skeptical public. "I had not the slightest doubt where our duty and our policy lay," he would later write in his memoirs. "Nor indeed what to say."⁶ But he didn't finish writing his speech until 8:40 p.m., just twenty minutes before it was due to be broadcast from a live microphone installed in Chequers.

Its tone was powerful and grave, with the prime minister's growling delivery giving it extra punch. He spoke artificially slowly and with long pauses, which served to heap significance onto each key phrase.

"Hitler is a monster of wickedness, insatiable in his lust for blood and plunder," he said. "Not content with having all Europe under his heel or else terrorized into various forms of abject submission, he must now carry his work of butchery and desolation among the vast multitudes of Russia and of Asia."

Churchill was brutally honest when admitting he had despised the Soviet regime for his entire political career. "No one has been a more consistent opponent of Communism than I have for the last twenty-five years. I will un-say no words that I've spoken about it. But all this fades away before the spectacle which is now unfolding." He disliked Joseph Stalin—intensely—but he detested Adolf Hitler.

"We are resolved to destroy Hitler and every vestige of the Nazi regime ... Any man or State who fights against Nazism will have our aid."⁷ It was Britain's duty to help the Soviet Union in its hour of desperate need. It was also in Britain's own interest.

Churchill's guests at Chequers began a postmortem of the speech within minutes of the broadcast. Anthony Eden was concerned that many people would be appalled at the idea of supporting the Soviet Union. In terms of politics, he said, "Russia was as bad as Germany."⁸ Jock Colville focused more on Churchill's pugnacious delivery. "Dramatic," he thought, "and it gave a clear decision of policy-support for Russia." Young Mary Churchill, the prime minister's teenage daughter, was even more rapturous. "Papa broadcast—superb. O darling, I love you so much and admire you more than you will ever know. Pray God you will be spared and supported."⁹

Churchill had pledged in his broadcast to do everything possible to save the Red Army from battlefield catastrophe, but there were many unanswered questions. *How* was he going to aid Stalin? By what means? Britain was in no position to help the Soviet Union with either armaments or raw materials.

And there were other questions, too. If Stalin was now an ally, then the prime minister would need an acceptable representative in Moscow—someone working alongside the Soviet leader, preferably inside the Kremlin. But who? It was hard to think of a suitable candidate. And that provoked yet another question: Would Stalin even accept such a person? Few Westerners, either British or American, had ever penetrated the crenelated walls of the Kremlin and it had been years since partisan journalists like Walter Duranty and Eugene Lyons had secured their interviews with the Soviet leader. Even they had never gained entry to Stalin's private study. The Soviet leader remained a near-total enigma, unknown and possibly unknowable. It was a worrying lacuna, given that he held the fate of the world in his hands.

Roosevelt Meets the Press

In distant Washington, President Roosevelt reacted to news of the Nazi invasion with far greater caution than Winston Churchill. He gave no statement on the day of the invasion and declined to hold an emergency press conference. The State Department was equally tight-lipped, releasing a short communiqué saying that Hitler's invasion was "convincing proof that the Reichsfuehrer Hitler plans to dominate the world."¹ But when journalists asked if America would supply the Soviet Union with tanks and guns, they were told that Stalin had not requested any weaponry. "Consequently, any questions regarding Lend-Lease aid need not be discussed at this time."²

There was good reason for avoiding the subject: President Roosevelt's inner circle could not agree on what to do next. Secretary of State Cordell Hull supported supplying Stalin with weaponry, while Secretary of War Henry Stimson was against such a policy.³ It would be for the president himself to decide.

An additional headache for President Roosevelt was the powerful America First movement, whose leading figure, General Robert Wood, derided those in favor of backing Communist Moscow. "The war party can hardly ask the American people to take up arms behind the Red flag of Stalin,"⁴ he said mockingly.

Influential voices in the Senate agreed. "Stalin is as bloody-handed as Hitler," opined one senator. "I don't think we should help either one." Senator Harry Truman took a yet more cynical approach: "If we see that Germany is winning, we ought to help Russia, and if Russia is winning, we ought to help Germany, and that way let them kill as many as possible."⁵ His was by no means a lone voice. When Gallup conducted a poll on Tuesday, June 24, two days after the invasion, it found that two-thirds of the population were against aiding the Soviet Union.

That same day, at four o'clock, President Roosevelt finally called a press conference in the Oval Office of the White House. The NBC radio journalist Earl Godwin was first into the room, joking with the president about enhanced security. Roosevelt liked Godwin, a veteran radioman, and had nicknamed him God. "We've been checking up on God for some time," he joshed as he mock-scrutinized Godwin's press pass.

The journalist May Craig was next through the door: she brought Roosevelt a sprig of forget-me-nots, which she placed on his desk. "Very nice, very nice," smiled the president as an increasing number of journalists filtered into his office. "I don't know why everyone's coming in," he said with a grin. "I haven't got any news today."

The first questions that afternoon were mundane. One reporter asked about Mammoth Cave National Park; another wanted to know about price controls. But it was not long before Godwin quizzed the president about the Soviet Union. He wanted to know whether Roosevelt was going

to support Stalin.

The president gave an unequivocal reply. "Of course we are going to give all the aid that we possibly can to Russia," he said. But he quickly added that he had not been in contact with Stalin and had no idea what aid he might need. He also told Godwin it would be far from easy to produce the necessary weaponry. "You can't just go around to Mr. Garfinckel's"—a Washington department store—"and fill the order and take it away with you."

At this, everyone laughed.

It soon became clear that the president was intending to reveal very little to the assembled journalists.

"What kind of things shall we give them, Mr. President?" asked one of the more persistent reporters.

"Oh, socks and shoes and things like that!" joked Roosevelt.

"Have you got a list now?"

"No."

"Will any priorities on airplanes be assigned to Russia?"

"I don't know," said Roosevelt. "I haven't the faintest idea."

Another journalist asked if weaponry for Stalin would be delivered under the same terms as they were being sent to Great Britain.

"I don't know," sighed the increasingly exasperated president, before adding, "I probably know less about the situation on the fighting front in Moscow than the average desk man does at this particular moment."

Another journalist asked if the defense of Russia was essential to the defense of the United States.

Roosevelt balked at this. "Oh, ask me a different question," he said. "You know I never answer those."⁶

It was an uninformative press conference, with the president remaining tight-lipped. But he did tell the reporters that he had ordered the release of frozen Soviet assets and he also suggested that the Neutrality Act, designed to keep America out of foreign conflicts, would not apply to the Soviet-German war. This left open the potential for deliveries of American weaponry to Soviet ports.

Little was made public in the days that followed, to the great frustration of the White House press corps. But behind the scenes there was a great deal of activity, with constant discussions between the State Department and the Soviet embassy in Washington. Within a fortnight, the Soviet ambassador, Constantine Oumansky, presented American officials with a formal request for two billion dollars' worth of aircraft, guns, and ammunition.

Without it, he said, the Soviet Union faced defeat.

Stalin's Crisis

Stalin was stunned by news of the invasion. He had ignored the warning signs and dismissed the intelligence. Although he had never trusted Nazi Germany, he didn't believe that Hitler would attack the Soviet Union in the foreseeable future. Just a few weeks earlier he had addressed a group of military cadets warning them to be "prepared for any surprises,"¹ but also assuring them that Hitler was fully preoccupied with his attempt to crush Great Britain.

Stalin's initial response to the invasion was to summon an emergency meeting of the Politburo. It was not yet dawn when he was driven to the Kremlin from his dacha at Kuntsevo. The Politburo members met in a second-floor room at 5:45 a.m., little more than an hour after the first German tanks had crossed the Soviet frontier. Among those in attendance were senior figures in Stalin's inner circle, including his foreign commissar, Vyacheslav Molotov, his defense commissar, Semon Timoshenko, and the chief of the General Staff, General Zhukov. Everyone was shocked to see Stalin in such a visible state of disarray. "His pock-marked face was drawn and haggard," recalled one of those present, while others would remember him bewildered and speaking in an unusually faltering voice. Stalin was indeed shocked by the enormity of what had happened and was unable to process information coming from the battlefield.

He clung to his earlier contention that the Wehrmacht's attack was a limited act of provocation. But Molotov dismissed this out of hand, reminding him that the German ambassador himself had confirmed that this was a full-scale invasion. This news hit Stalin hard. "He sank in his chair and was locked in deep thought," noted Zhukov. There was a long silence as he summoned the strength to speak. "The enemy will be beaten all along the line,"² he said blandly. He then turned to his generals and asked how the military should respond to the German blitzkrieg. Zhukov began explaining the importance of frontier troops holding up the Wehrmacht's advance when he was stopped midsentence by an irritable Timoshenko. "Annihilate," he interjected. "Not held up."³

At 7:15 a.m., Stalin issued his first wartime order. Luftwaffe aircraft were to be destroyed; air attacks were to be launched on German territory; and Soviet troops were to "annihilate" the invading forces. The Politburo members then discussed how best to break the news to the nation. There was widespread agreement that Stalin himself should broadcast the news, but the Soviet leader demurred. "Let Molotov speak,"⁴ he said, reasoning that it was Molotov who had put his signature to the Nazi-Soviet pact.

Molotov managed to control his stammer as he informed the Soviet people of the momentous events that had taken place during the night. "At four o'clock this morning, without declaration

of war, and without any claims being made on the Soviet Union, German troops attacked our country ... This unheard-of attack is an unparalleled act of perfidy in the history of civilized nations.”

In his customary monotone he told them of Hitler’s abject treachery. “This attack has been made despite the fact that there was a non-aggression pact between the Soviet Union and Germany, a pact the terms of which were scrupulously observed by the Soviet Union.” Molotov also reminded his listeners that Hitler had already ridden roughshod over all the peoples of Central and Western Europe, bringing misery to millions.

He ended his broadcast with a reminder that Russia had been invaded before, in the Great Patriotic War of 1812, and that the people had risen as one to crush Napoleon. The same thing would happen to Hitler. “Our cause is good,” he said. “The enemy will be smashed. Victory will be ours.”⁵

Stalin congratulated Molotov on his performance, although he did so with a customary lack of grace. “Well,” he said, “you sounded a bit flustered, but the speech went well.”

Muscovites greeted news of the invasion with horrified astonishment. For the previous two years, they had been fed uplifting stories about Stalin’s ongoing alliance with Hitler. Now, in a startling volte-face, they were being told their Nazi ally was a treacherous thug.

Stalin’s mood darkened that morning as news of enemy successes reached the Kremlin. He was appalled to learn of the destruction of vast numbers of Soviet planes before they had even taken to the skies. “Surely the German air force didn’t manage to reach every single airfield?”⁶ he asked, incredulous.

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THE WEHRMACHT SWEPT through the Soviet border defenses with astonishing ease, crushing everything in its path. A similar story unfolded on all three fronts: Red Army soldiers were defeated before they even had a chance to fight.

The military situation seemed hopeless. Railway junctions and lines of communications had been destroyed; command posts were in flames; and there was a disastrous shortage of army vehicles in the frontier districts. Most Soviet soldiers had turned and fled, but their hasty flight brought its own problems. “Bottlenecks were formed by troops, artillery, motor vehicles and field kitchens,” wrote General Ivan Boldin, one of Stalin’s frontline commanders, “and then the Nazi planes had the time of their life ... Often our troops could not dig in, simply because they did not even have the simplest implements. Occasionally trenches had to be dug with helmets, since there were no spades.”⁷

As the day progressed, Stalin learned that the situation was even worse than he had feared. The Germans were everywhere advancing, with the city of Minsk already in their sights. He fumed at his commissars. “Lenin founded our state,” he said, “and we’ve fucked it up.”⁸

A short time afterward, he shocked his Politburo comrades by issuing a five-word statement of intent. “Everything’s lost,” he told them. “I give up.” With this phrase ringing in their ears, he left the Kremlin and retreated to his Kuntsevo dacha.

In the days that followed, Stalin was seen by no one. He refused to receive any visitors and wouldn’t even answer the phone. Nor did he respond to Winston Churchill’s BBC broadcast, in which the prime minister had pledged British support for the Soviet Union. Yet he surely knew what Churchill had said, for transcripts of the PM’s speech were already being translated into