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## Shocking But Not Surprising

### British and Soviet Intelligence Surrounding Operation Barbarossa

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**Abstract:** Operation Barbarossa has received significant attention as one of the most famous surprise attacks in the history of war, and also as one of the most disastrous intelligence failures to date. Why did Stalin so obstinately refuse to believe that the Germans would invade Russia in June of 1941 despite receiving a multitude of warnings? This paper seeks to examine the intelligence systems of Great Britain and the Soviet Union with a focus on each system’s approach to intelligence surrounding Operation Barbarossa to understand why the British and Soviet intelligence communities came to different conclusions regarding the validity of such intelligence. Despite both systems struggling to heed warnings of Operation Barbarossa due to a variety of factors—disinformation efforts, the current state of the war, and the circumstances of German-Soviet relations—it was ultimately the UK that was able to accept the validity of such warnings and act accordingly. While both systems were formidable and had received ample warnings of the coming attack from a variety of sources, the British intelligence system was more equipped to act upon gathered information due to differences in leadership and intelligence system hierarchies.

**Keywords:** *intelligence, Operation Barbarossa, Britain, Soviet Union*

### Introduction

Operation Barbarossa has received significant attention in World War II studies as one of the most famous surprise attacks in the history of war, and also as one of the most disastrous intelligence failures to date. On June 22, 1941, Adolf Hitler broke Germany’s non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union and launched a blitzkrieg attack, intending to quickly crush the Soviet Union’s Red Army and occupy the major cities of Kiev, Leningrad, and Moscow.<sup>①</sup> The operation was part of Hitler’s vision to racially reorganize Eastern Europe through his brutal *Generalplan Ost*, which would eliminate the Slavs and obtain more

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<sup>①</sup> David M. Glantz, “Operation Barbarossa (1941),” in *The Encyclopedia of War*, ed. Gordon Martell (Hoboken: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2011).

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territory for German expansion.<sup>①</sup> Although the operation ultimately ended in defeat in December of the same year, its initial speed and ferocity caught the Soviets off guard and resulted in substantial losses of human life and property. Operation Barbarossa is recognized as a turning point in the Second World War as it pulled the Soviet Union into the conflict, aligning it with the Allied Powers and ultimately bringing about the defeat of Nazi Germany. This paper seeks to examine the intelligence systems of Great Britain and the Soviet Union, looking briefly at structure, operations, and leadership, and focuses on each system's approach to intelligence surrounding Operation Barbarossa, with the goal of understanding why the British and Soviet intelligence communities were able to come to different conclusions regarding the validity of such intelligence.

### **British Intelligence**

It is difficult to discuss the British intelligence system as a singular entity, as "British intelligence" could refer to information collected by any number of organizations. As a detailed examination of the structure, evolution, and degrees of cooperation between British intelligence organizations are beyond the scope of this paper, it will instead briefly mention the primary entities responsible for intelligence collection and processing. UK Professor Eunan O'Halpin gives a succinct overview of British intelligence operations structure from the turn of the century through the Second World War:

The principal intelligence agencies in the period were MI6 or the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), under Foreign Office control and responsible for the collection of intelligence outside British territory, and M15, the domestic security and counter-espionage body. These two agencies emerged from the division in 1910 of the Secret Service Bureau, which had been founded in the previous year. In addition to them, in wartime each of the armed services built up intelligence gathering and processing organizations. The latter were created in a hurry, and it took time to establish a working relationship with the older intelligence agencies. Inevitably there were rivalries, competition and confusion between the different bodies, and nothing resembling a unified intelligence service was ever established.<sup>②</sup>

Although the British intelligence community predated the Great War, it was wholly unprepared when war broke out again in 1939. Much of the country's intelligence structure had been neglected during interwar peacetime, and operated on the "Ten Year Rule," which ruled out the threat of war within a decade. Impeded by this assumption and organizational issues, British intelligence lacked consistent, high-quality

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① David C. Gompert, Hans Binnendijk, and Bonny Lin, "Hitler's Decision to Invade the USSR, 1941," in *Blinders, Blunders, and Wars: What America and China Can Learn* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2014), 82.

② K.G. Robertson, ed., *British and American Approaches to Intelligence*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1987), 187.

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information, and was ill-equipped to make long-range assessments about developments in Germany.<sup>①</sup> Also, as is evident in the number of relevant organizations at the time, the British intelligence structure was rather decentralized, which often accounted for challenges regarding communication, overlap/underlap, and inconsistencies in operational policy. Notwithstanding, its decentralized nature likely afforded British intelligence some benefits as well. The various agencies were able to focus on their respective areas of strength and adapt as intelligence needs changed.<sup>②</sup> Overall, Britain's intelligence community grew rapidly during the Second World War.

Despite British intelligence's weakness and underdevelopment at the outbreak of war, it was still formidable in several regards. Perhaps most impressive about British intelligence was its variety of methods for collecting information, including espionage, aerial photography, captured documents, underground networks in occupied territories, and extractions from Axis prisoners of war.<sup>③④</sup> Naturally, British intelligence cannot be discussed without giving considerable attention to Ultra, the project responsible for obtaining wartime signals intelligence by cracking encrypted enemy radio and teleprinter communications. Having recovered 180 cypher keys in May 1940,<sup>⑤</sup> Ultra had become the most important source of intelligence by the summer of 1941 and was deemed the only source capable of influencing strategy.<sup>⑥</sup> Henceforth, all military tactics were in some manner informed by intelligence gleaned by Ultra. One example of the utility of Ultra can be seen in its contribution to strategy toward German U-boats. From June 1941, the British read the U-boat intelligence traffic regularly and without delay, "an advance which almost wholly explains why they prevented the U-boats from dominating the Atlantic during the autumn of 1941 and the winter of 1941-1942."<sup>⑦</sup>

### Soviet Intelligence

The Soviet Union's intelligence system also operated well before World War II. Its lineage began with the Cheka, the original state security organization established by the Bolsheviks in 1917, and by the onset of World War II had been reorganized into the NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs). After the German invasion, the NKVD was primarily responsible for the mass evacuation and execution of political prisoners. While mainly intended for internal security, used on the front to prevent retreat and

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① Ibid., 90-91.

② Robertson, ed., *British and American Approaches to Intelligence*.

③ F. H. Hinsley, "British Intelligence in the Second World War: An Overview," *Cryptologia* 14, no.1 (1990): 1-10.

④ Kent Fedorowich, "Axis Prisoners of War as Sources for British Military Intelligence, 1939-42," *Intelligence and National Security* 14, no.2 (1999): 156-78.

⑤ Hinsley, "British Intelligence in the Second World War: An Overview," 3.

⑥ Robertson, ed., *British and American Approaches to Intelligence*, 135.

⑦ Hinsley, "British Intelligence in the Second World War: An Overview," 8.

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desertion of Soviet Army divisions, it did on occasion carry out missions of sabotage in enemy-held territories. Tasks directed by various subdivisions of the NKVD included conducting intelligence activities abroad, battling espionage and sabotage acts in USSR territory, liquidating counter-revolutionaries, overseeing ideology, and protecting government officials.<sup>①②</sup>

Like its British counterpart, the Soviet intelligence system also had several channels for collecting information at its disposal. Russia's main asset was perhaps its network of spies throughout the Comintern. However, while this network was able to provide the USSR with strategic intelligence, it was usually concerning allies rather than enemies, as can be seen by the efforts devoted to infiltrating Britain's MI5 and MI6. Additionally, the centralized nature of the NKVD likely improved the coordination of information. It was organized along command and functional lines, and included fifteen subordinate special departments, each with specific functions. Due to this and established reporting channels, officers were no longer beholden to army commanders, and could therefore concentrate specifically on security work.<sup>③</sup>

### **Intelligence Surrounding Operation Barbarossa**

Perhaps unsurprising to those well-versed in intelligence studies, Britain and the Soviet Union similarly experienced significant failures in their approaches to intelligence regarding Germany's changing intentions toward the Soviet Union, especially in the early stages. Despite the growing number of rumors predicting that Germany would invade the Soviet Union in the spring or summer of 1941, the British intelligence community in general gave little credit to them and maintained the opinion that Germany would ultimately not risk open conflict with the Russians. This was in part due to the consistent understanding that Germany's main priority was to defeat Great Britain, and hence would continue to focus the majority of its efforts on preparing for Operation Sea Lion. To the majority of the British intelligence community, the idea that Germany may tie itself down on an eastern front, and therefore redistribute its efforts to some extent away from the United Kingdom, was frankly inconceivable. It was not until March 27 that this perception changed, when a Chiefs of Staff summary noted that Germany was again increasing its troops in Poland. This reflected intelligence received from the GAF Enigma the previous day that three armored divisions and other important elements had been ordered to move from the Balkans to the Kraków area. On

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① Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *KGB: The Inside Story of Its Foreign Operations from Lenin to Gorbachev* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), ix.

② Robert Stephan, "Smersh: Soviet Military Counter-Intelligence during the Second World War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 22, no.4 (1987): 586-87.

③ John Ferris, "Intelligence," in *The Cambridge History of the Second World War*, Vol. 1, ed. John Ferris and Evan Mawdsley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

the 27<sup>th</sup>, the Enigma revealed that part of this transfer was being cancelled. This provided the first confirmation that Germany's preparations were directed against Russia.<sup>①</sup>

The amount of intelligence that the Soviet Union received regarding Hitler's intentions was also extensive. Spymaster Barton Whaley has previously cited over eighty-four warnings that should have alerted Moscow, from both within the Soviet intelligence system and outside, yet none were able to convince Stalin to properly prepare for the coming blitzkrieg.<sup>②</sup> Many warnings came from within the NKVD. One such report, sent to Stalin by Pavel Fitin, Chief of NKGB Foreign Intelligence, asserted that German preparations had been made and that the Soviet Union could expect the attack at any time. Stalin sent the report back to Fitin's supervisor with the note: "Comrade Merkulov, you can send your 'source'... to his f—king mother. This is not a 'source' but a *dezinformator*."<sup>③</sup> Similarly, as early as November 1940, Richard Sorge—a top operative stationed in Japan—reported that Germany was creating and mobilizing divisions against the Soviet border and that the offensive would begin on June 20-22. Stalin dismissed Sorge's warnings outright as well, calling him "a little shit who has set himself up with some small factories and brothels in Japan."<sup>④</sup>

Aside from the ample warning Stalin received from within the Soviet system, he also received many from foreign sources. On April 11, Stafford Cripps, the British ambassador to the USSR and one of the few who believed that Hitler would "overcome his fear of a war on two fronts," alerted Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Vyshinsky of the impending attack. Once Ultra had "illuminated the whole eastern scene," Churchill insisted that his own warning be sent to Stalin, believing that the cryptic message would arrest his attention. While the message did get Stalin's attention, he considered it "merely a device to embroil the Soviet Union in war."<sup>⑤</sup> A month before Churchill's letter, President Roosevelt had directed Sumner Welles, the US Deputy Secretary of State, to call in the Soviet ambassador Konstantin Umansky and give him information about the German massing of troops in Poland. Stalin also wrote this off as a plot by Washington and London to provoke a war.<sup>⑥</sup>

While both Britain and the Soviet Union expressed severe misgivings regarding the seriousness or validity of the many predictions that Germany would invade Russia, they differed in that the British intelligence system was able to eventually alter its perception. What then was the deciding factor that allowed Britain to eventually heed incoming intelligence and adapt accordingly, yet prevented the Soviet

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① Francis Hinsley et al., *British Intelligence in the Second World War: Its Influence on Strategy and Operations*, Vol. 1. (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1979), 451.

② Gompert, Binnendijk, and Lin, "Hitler's Decision to Invade the USSR, 1941," 85.

③ David E. Murphy, *What Stalin Knew: The Enigma of Barbarossa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), xv.

④ *Ibid.*, 87.

⑤ Gabriel Gorodetsky, "Churchill's Warning to Stalin: A Reappraisal," *The Historical Journal* 29, no.4 (1986): 983.

⑥ John Lukacs, *June 1941: Hitler and Stalin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 73.

Union from doing the same? How was Operation Barbarossa still able to take Stalin by surprise when it should have been anything but surprising?

### **Existing Arguments**

Stalin's "folly" and the extreme intelligence failure that was Operation Barbarossa has been at the forefront of intelligence studies ever since its occurrence. While there is abundant scholarly debate surrounding the Soviet Union's mishandling of relevant intelligence, less emphasis has been applied to Britain's degree of intelligence success regarding the military operation. Most literature focuses on British intelligence as a whole throughout the war period, and its success or lack thereof in influencing strategy for many campaigns. Less prevalent is literature focused specifically on whether British intelligence was superior to that of the Soviet Union in regard to applying its Barbarossa intelligence to strategy. This is understandable, as Britain was far less impacted by the campaign, having not been directly involved. Simply put, German-Soviet relations were important, but not the primary focus of British intelligence. At most, accurately predicting Barbarossa would have potentially given Britain the opportunity curry favor with Stalin and convince him to join the Allied effort. In fact, the overall consensus among existing literature seems to be that British intelligence and its inherent capabilities at the onset of the war were largely underwhelming and that it was generally unprepared to operate effectively.

That being said, the most often cited reason for British intelligence successes is the utilization of Ultra. It is certainly given the most attention among all methods of information collection by the British government during the Second World War. However, defaulting to Ultra's utility as a reason for military success encounters some issues when considering that intelligence is not everything, and that wars are not won by intelligence alone. Furthermore, Ultra only proved itself to be of great value and able to change popular opinion starting in the summer of 1941, and the provision of information from varying sources was a necessary precondition for Ultra to function effectively, as it usually served to validate information.

As mentioned, more discussion exists on the contributing factors to the Soviet Union's approach to intelligence surrounding Operation Barbarossa. Like the British (and most others), the Soviet intelligence community had a difficult time believing the Germans would invade Russia given the current state of the war. With Germany tied down on its western front with the UK, all signs indicated that Operation Sea Lion was at that time Hitler's top priority, and that he would ensure the defeat of Britain before turning his sights eastward. While he understood that Russia would eventually be subject to German hostilities, Stalin still assumed that Hitler would maintain friendly ties between Germany and the Soviet Union while the former

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dealt with Britain.<sup>①</sup> But Hitler was indeed willing—eager, even—to launch his offensive against Russia as soon as possible, even before concluding his campaign on the Western Front. Stalin misjudged Hitler to behave rationally, which he did not.

Stalin's assumption that Hitler would remain friendly, at least for a while, was due to two main factors: the non-aggression pact between them and Germany's reliance on Soviet military aid. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was signed on August 23, 1939, and contained a five-year mutual nonaggression agreement, as well as a secret protocol dividing the territory between them.<sup>②</sup> Considering Hitler's hatred of Jewish Bolshevism and persistent goal to expand the German nation eastward,<sup>③</sup> Stalin understood that this pact was temporary; a German attack was less about *if* and more about *when*. The Soviet Union's entry to the pact, which surprised many, was part of a strategy to buy time. The Red Army was incredibly weak and disorganized at the time due to military purges that Stalin had initiated in 1937, resulting in a lack of experienced senior commanders capable of command initiative.<sup>④</sup> Hoping to buy enough time to properly reform the military, Stalin was reluctant to take any action that could provoke Germany to launch its offensive earlier. This may explain why Stalin did not dispatch Soviet troops to the border in preparation, as that would have likely raised suspicion and provoked retaliation. However, this explanation is overall unsatisfactory as it does not really consider the fact that the benefits of proactively reinforcing the border would have surely outweighed the cons, especially if it was understood a German attack was ultimately inevitable.

Equally relevant in Stalin's assumption that Germany would not invade as early as predicted was the factor of Germany's reliance on Soviet aid to advance its war efforts. Stalin was of the understanding that Germany could not hope to defeat Britain without the food and raw materials provided by the Soviet Union.<sup>⑤</sup> Invading Russia would obviously mean the end of any such trade relationship, and so Stalin recognized that Germany's dependency on Russian resources worked in his favor. Hitler of course understood this as well, but was just as prepared to acquire necessary provisions through forceful occupation. Stalin perhaps should have understood, and likely did understand, that his primary bargaining chip was slipping away once the trade relationship between the two countries began to rapidly deteriorate

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① Murphy, *What Stalin Knew: The Enigma of Barbarossa*, 145.

② Gompert, Binnendijk, and Lin, "Hitler's Decision to Invade the USSR, 1941," 83.

③ Jürgen Förster, "Barbarossa Revisited: Strategy and Ideology in the East," *Jewish Social Studies* 50, no.1/2 (1988): 23.

④ David M. Glantz, "Operation Barbarossa (1941)," in *The Encyclopedia of War*, ed. Gordon Martell (Hoboken: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2011), 1.

⑤ Francis Hinsley et al., *British Intelligence in the Second World War: Its Influence on Strategy and Operations*, Vol. 1. (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1979), 434.

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in February 1940.<sup>①</sup> This surely indicated that Hitler was less inclined to maintain their friendship and was probably preparing to attack.

### Analysis

This paper does not seek to disqualify the existing arguments discussed above, as they certainly played an important role in influencing how Britain and Russia perceived incoming intelligence about German intentions. It instead aims to emphasize the human factor and argue that, when considering the differing degrees of success between the two intelligence systems regarding Operation Barbarossa, the importance of leadership—and said leadership’s perceptions—cannot be overstated. As Wesley Wark reminds us, “the critical flow of intelligence to decision-makers is often interrupted by the human element in government organizations – personality clashes, bureaucratic conflicts, and sheer bumbling... Intelligence failure cannot be explained solely as a result of the quirks and flaws in the system.”<sup>②</sup> The human element of the decision-makers themselves must also be considered.

While naturally at the top of the command chain as Prime Minister, Winston Churchill did not insist on micromanaging intelligence efforts and instead allowed experienced and capable professionals to lead the charge. Churchill initially did not have much respect for the machinery of intelligence analysis, and insisted on examining the material for himself. However, once he saw it and understood that it was well beyond even his capacities, he allowed those who were capable to review everything and report to him the relevant findings.<sup>③</sup> This somewhat hands-off approach enabled the intelligence organizations to function independently and objectively. Further, Churchill was not as prone as Stalin to disbelieving bad news or filtering facts to fit his preconceptions. In fact, Churchill may have been too quick to accept the intelligence he received. For example, in 1941 Churchill badgered Commander-in-Chief Wavell and later Auchinleck to launch an offensive against German and Italian forces in North Africa despite their misgivings because he deemed Ultra intelligence infallible and believed it would guarantee operational success.<sup>④</sup>

Josef Stalin, on the other hand, was not the type of leader to allow something of such importance to function without his constant oversight. By establishing himself at the top of the intelligence system,<sup>⑤</sup> and having reduced the number of high-ranking officers within the army through his brutal purges, Stalin prevented more experienced officers from leading intelligence collecting and processing efforts. This

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① Ibid.

② Robertson, ed., *British and American Approaches to Intelligence*, 87.

③ Ibid., 170.

④ Ibid., 132-36.

⑤ Robert Stephan, "Smersh: Soviet Military Counter-Intelligence during the Second World War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 22, no.4 (1987): 589.



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impractical hierarchy, combined with his extreme paranoia, enabled Stalin to filter intelligence according to what fit his preestablished perceptions, rather than allowing his perceptions to be shaped by incoming information. As previously mentioned, Stalin's preconceived notion was that a German attack was inevitable, but that it could not possibly happen so soon, as Germany had signed a non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union and relied heavily on its resources and military aid. Certain that this was true, Stalin was inclined to reject or disregard any piece of intelligence that claimed otherwise, as can be seen in the cases of intelligence from Fitin, Sorge, and others. Stalin also attributed much of the intelligence to be part of Germany's extensive misinformation campaigns. Barton Whaley cites Germany's deception plan as highly effective, because it accorded with Stalin's "desperate conviction that Hitler would not attack the East in 1941, or if he did, that the Soviets would at least receive an ultimatum and be able to preserve some room for diplomatic maneuver."<sup>①</sup> Confident that Germany was merely attempting to apply pressure on the Soviet Union in order to coerce it into a closer partnership, Stalin saw no need to consider these tactics as anything but strongarming and believed that if he continued to accommodate Hitler, war could be avoided—or at least delayed.<sup>②</sup> In Stalin's mind, if these warnings were not part of German misinformation, then they were likely part of Britain's ploy to pull the Soviet Union into the war by pitting it against Germany and thus lessening its burden of fighting the Nazis essentially on its own.<sup>③</sup> Stalin's distrust of the British not only led him to reject warnings coming from across the Channel, but also led him to focus much of the Soviet intelligence efforts on spying on the United Kingdom (which continued even after the Soviet Union allied with the Allied Powers).

### Conclusion

Both Great Britain and the Soviet Union were home to impressive intelligence systems during the Second World War. Intelligence operations of both countries had their fair share of issues, such as poor organization and inadequate financing,<sup>④</sup> but both also received ample sources of intelligence warning them of an impending German invasion of the Soviet Union in the spring or summer of 1941. Both struggled to heed this intelligence due to a variety of factors: disinformation efforts, the current state of the war, and the circumstances of German-Soviet relations. Ultimately, it was the British that were able to accept the validity of such warnings and act accordingly by trying to warn Stalin, whereas Stalin remained obstinate to the bitter end, and was unable to counter the German offense until well after considerable damage and loss of

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① Robertson, ed., *British and American Approaches to Intelligence*, 89.

② Gabriel Gorodetsky, "Churchill's Warning to Stalin: A Reappraisal," *The Historical Journal* 29, no.4 (1986): 982.

③ *Ibid.*, 980.

④ Robertson, ed., *British and American Approaches to Intelligence*, 187-214.

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life had been wrought. This however is not to say that the British intelligence system was therefore far superior to its Soviet counterpart. The British intelligence community may have been able to change its perceptions based on intelligence about Barbarossa, but only at the last moment and only because of Ultra's timely ability to substantiate such information. At the time of the attack, British intelligence was still considered to have a minimal influence on strategy.<sup>①</sup> And, like the Soviet Union, issues of perception and preconceived notions also hindered British intelligence in regard to its strategic application.

Operation Barbarossa proved that regardless of how formidable a state's intelligence system was, its success in informing wartime strategy ultimately rested on the perceptions and competence of its principal leaders. Such systems could not function properly and effectively if its leader did not support competency, innovation, and differing perspectives, nor if he did not allow them to inform wartime decisions. The British intelligence system included several channels for intelligence collection, as well as internal procedures to prevent uniform flow of intelligence leading to a single conclusion.<sup>②</sup> Churchill, despite being at the top of the authority chain, allowed qualified intelligence workers to drive the initiative. Ultra staff and secret service agents were kept separate from operational decisions, and so they passed intelligence to authorized recipients without any operational deductions or proposals for action.<sup>③</sup>

Conversely, Stalin dominated the chain of command, which dissuaded others from relaying information to him, and allowed him to filter intelligence according to his preconceptions. So, while Stalin knew that something like Barbarossa would happen eventually, he was certainly surprised that it indeed occurred at the forewarned moment. Operation Barbarossa was shocking in its ferocity and brutality, but it was not surprising. Nonetheless, eighty years on, this failure is still studied in depth and remains significant regarding considerations of intelligence capabilities, military strategy, and state decision-making.

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① Robertson, ed., *British and American Approaches to Intelligence*, 136.

② *Ibid.*, 172.

③ *Ibid.*, 131.

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