World War 2: Alliances and Pacts Between Opposing Ideologies

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Introduction

The Second World War was the deadliest war in history, spanning nearly six years. In 1941, the Nazis and their anti-Communist views violated their pact with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, starting a front where the biggest military confrontations would take place, and where more than 80% of Axis casualties occurred (Murray, “Operation Barbarossa”). Battles were characterized by unprecedented ferocity, wholesale destruction, mass deportations to death camps, and the massive loss of life. After the Nazis violated the pact, the Soviet Union instead formed an alliance with the US, which would allow the Soviets to win their theater of the war, freeing millions from Nazi oppression. But this alliance, just like their pact with Hitler, would also end tragically. After the war, postwar decisions and ideological differences quickly created tension among the former allies, which would dominate the second half of the 20th century.

Historical Context: Pre-Invasion and Nazi-Soviet Relations

On August 23, 1939, the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, which was essentially a non-aggression pact, was signed between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, shocking the world since their ideologies were so different (“German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact”). Just several months earlier Hitler had violated the Treaty of Versailles by annexing Austria and occupying parts of Czechoslovakia (Treaty of Versailles). With Europe on the brink of another major war, Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin viewed the pact as a way to keep his nation on peaceful terms with Germany, allowing him to build up the military further (German-Soviet Pact). The pact also made a
deal for a joint invasion of Poland and a secret plan on how the Nazis and the Soviets would split Eastern Europe (German-Soviet Pact).

**Joint Invasion of Poland**

Just one week later on September 1, 1939, Hitler initiated the invasion of Poland, sparking the Second World War. Nazi propaganda writers falsely claimed that Poland and its allies Britain and France had been planning to encircle and dismember Germany and that the Poles were persecuting ethnic Germans to justify their invasion (USHMM, “Invasion of Poland, Fall 1939”). The pact also greatly increased trade between the two countries; the Germans traded their military technology and weapons with Soviet raw materials (Johnson, “Sowing the Wind”). Poland was invaded by the Germans from the West and the North using “Blitzkrieg” tactics, which was to conquer Poland as fast as possible by surprise (USHMM, Poland). As a result, Soon after, Stalin ordered the Red Army to invade Poland from the East (“Hitler’s Invasion of Poland Explained”). Polish resistance was of little use; despite being highly motivated to defend the country the soldiers were heavily outnumbered and couldn’t fight two fronts (Lee, “Hitler’s Invasion of Poland Explained”). In under one month, Poland surrendered, and aid from the British never arrived (USHMM, Poland). Polish civilians, mostly Jews, were immediately sent to Nazi death camps where most were immediately killed (USHMM, Poland). The following year the Axis powers alliance was formed with the signing of the Tripartite Pact between Germany, Italy, and Japan (“The Tripartite Pact”). But despite lots of initial cooperation between two countries that were on opposite sides of the political spectrum, the agreement would soon be violated. By May, 1941, Hitler had
occupied most of Europe, and saw the Soviet Union as his next opponent (Murray, Barbarossa).

**Beginning of US-Soviet Relations and the Lend-Lease**

In March, 1941, Congress passed the Lend-Lease Act to send military weapons, technology, and supplies to foreign nations during the war and money to “the government of any country whose defense the President deems vital to the defense of the United States.” (Garraty, “Lend-Lease Act”). This was originally for mainly Britain and China. Prior to the war, US-Soviet relations had been strained, and deteriorated further due to Stalin’s decision to sign the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (US Department of State, “Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations”). Soviet war decisions in the early stages of the war led President Franklin Roosevelt to condemn the Soviet Union publicly as a “dictatorship as absolute as any other dictatorship in the world,” and imposed a “moral embargo” on the export of specific products to the Soviets (US, Milestones US Relations). Nevertheless, despite intense pressure to split relations with the Soviet Union, Roosevelt never forgot that Nazi Germany, not the Soviet Union, posed the greatest threat to world peace (US, Milestones US Relations). Roosevelt announced that he “would hold hands with the devil” if necessary (US, Milestones US Relations). As a result, when the Soviet Union was invaded, the act was expanded to include the Soviet Union (US, Milestones US Relations). The Lend-Lease was a big step made by the US to involvement with foreign nations.
Germany Invades the Soviet Union

On June 22, 1941, Hitler, driven by his anti-Communist views, took his biggest gamble of the war by initiating “Operation Barbarossa”, a ‘surprise’ plan to invade the Soviet Union, violating the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (US Department of State, “Hitler’s Explanation of the Soviet Invasion”). More than four million Axis troops were sent to the German-Soviet border for the invasion which again used Blitzkrieg tactics (Murray, Barbarossa). While the Red Army had even more personnel, they were poorly equipped and completely unprepared (Jackson, “Barbarossa Hitler Stalin: War Warnings Stalin Ignored”), the main reason for the incredible speed of the Axis advance.

Pre-Invasion Warnings

Stalin had previously received excessive amounts of warnings about the impending Axis invasion but due to his incompetence, he ignored all of them, thinking that he could trust a regime built to hate the Bolshevik ideology. Russian military historian Arsen Martirosyan revealed that Soviet intelligence named dates within a few days of the actual date of invasion 47 times in the ten days before the invasion occurred (“Barbarossa Hitler Stalin: War Warnings Stalin Ignored”). He also revealed that in the days of June before the invasion, over 300 enemy spies and saboteurs were captured (Jackson, Barbarossa Hitler Stalin). But most importantly, border guards revealed the exact date of the invasion to Stalin eight days before the invasion occurred and two captured saboteurs revealed the same date just four days later (Jackson, Barbarossa Hitler Stalin). Polish Women also warned Soviet border guards about the invasion and knew the exact date (Jackson, Barbarossa Hitler Stalin). Martirosyan,
seeking to defend Stalin’s war record, claims that Stalin dismissed the warnings due to a lack of credible evidence (Jackson, Barbarossa Hitler Stalin), and Stalin’s war decisions prior to the invasion are still disputed today.

**Operation Barbarossa**

Upon the start of the invasion, the war in the east had become an ideological struggle. In the first few weeks of the invasion, the German 2nd and 3rd Panzer Groups decimated Soviet frontier defenses and encircled four Soviet Armies near Bialystok and Minsk ("The Battle of Bialystok-Minsk"). In just 18 days the Nazis destroyed all Soviet defenses in the western Soviet Union, yielding 300 thousand Soviet Prisoners of War (POWs) ("The Battle of Bialystok-Minsk"). Soon after, the Soviets lost another battle to the Germans at Smolensk, and once again they would suffer another defeat, this one even bigger. At Kiev the Red Army was again surrounded in a major encirclement campaign, resulting in heavy losses for the Soviets, with casualties surpassing 700,000 (Jones, "Kiev 1941: Hitler’s Battle for Supremacy in the East"). Not only did this reduce Soviet personnel, but it also destroyed many military equipment such as tanks and aircraft, further reducing morale for the Soviets (Jones, Kiev 1941). Unsurprisingly, the Germans suffered very few casualties compared to the Soviets with their superior technology. But as invincible as the Germans seemed to the Allies, they would soon be forced to halt the invasion.

**Failure**

By October, it became clear to the Allies that the Soviet Union was on the verge of collapse. A series of major defeats greatly weakened the already unprepared Soviets,
but soon things would change. Hitler and his general urged for one final push to take
Moscow with the belief that the Soviet morale was too low to continue fighting(Carter, “Operation Barbarossa: Germany’s Failure in the Soviet Union”). But despite such
heavy losses, the Soviets continued to fight and slow the invasion, effectively stalling it
until winter, and weather soon took a huge toll on the Germans(Carter, Barbarossa).
They had underestimated the Soviets, believing that such an invasion could easily be
finished before winter(Carter, Barbarossa). Unlike France, they did not immediately
surrender to Blitzkrieg tactics, as more than a million Soviets participated in the defense
of Moscow(Carter, Barbarossa). Soon, roads turned into mud, heavily delaying German
advances(Carter, Barbarossa). Despite the roads freezing hard due to low temperatures
only a few weeks later, temperatures dropped far below freezing due to an unusually
cold Russian Winter(US Army, “A 1952 US Army report on the impact of weather and
climate on the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union”), crippling the unprepared Germans.
The Soviets, on the other hand, were very prepared for such weather. Not only did they
have the proper clothing for the temperature, but they had snow camouflage(Carter,
Barbarossa). For the first time, Blitzkrieg was causing problems for the Germans; they
had advanced too deep into Soviet Territory in a too short amount of time, causing
major logistical problems for the Germans(Carter, Barbarossa). They were entirely
dependent on supplies of fuel and ammunition, but by late 1941, supply lines became
too long(Carter, Barbarossa). Soviet transport was often poor quality and the Germans
struggled to convert it into usable infrastructure(Carter, Barbarossa). The Lend-Lease
was now giving the Soviets a large portion of their military supplies and raw materials,
further slowing the German invasion (Weeks, 8-9). A combination of these factors completely halted the invasion which was a fatal mistake for the Germans, allowing the Soviets to initiate a counterattack.

**The Soviet Counterattack**

Soon after, the Soviets pushed for a counteroffensive. The arrival of new aircraft from the US boosted the Soviet aircraft count to 1,376, dwarfing the 599 aircrafts of the now weakened Germans (Chant, “Moscow Strategic Offensive Operation”). Hitler ordered the axis troops to change into a defensive stance but this was close to impossible due to the extreme cold, and in just two weeks the Axis had been pushed back 60-160 miles from Moscow, removing immediate threat from the city (Hickman, “World War 2: Battle for Moscow”). Soviet offensive operations continued for the next several months and allowed them to regain a small portion of their occupied land, but soon the Germans stabilized the front (Jewish Virtual Library, “The Battle of Stalingrad”).

**Stalingrad**

With winter weather gone, the Germans were confident that they could crush the Red Army without the weather impeding their mobility. But this time instead of targeting Moscow, the obvious target, Hitler ordered the Germans to take over the oil fields of Caucasus, effectively destroying the Soviet fuel supply (Jewish Virtual Library, Stalingrad). But the city of interest to Hitler was Stalingrad for many reasons. It was a major industrial city and vital transport route, and its capture would secure the left-flank of the German armies advancing into Caucasus (Jewish Virtual Library, Stalingrad). But his main reason was purely for propaganda; since it bore Stalin’s name its capture
would make an ideological and propaganda coup (Jewish Virtual Library, Stalingrad). Stalin, however, realized this and ordered the Red Army to defend the city at all costs (Jewish Virtual Library, Stalingrad). Yet again the Red Army suffered a series of defeats at first (Lambrecht, “Why did Germany Lose the Battle of Stalingrad”), but soon the Germans would suffer another devastating defeat. The battle, which would last months, was an example of the sheer desperation of the Soviets. Civilians and even children were conscripted without training into the Red Army and even many women were forced to join, usually as snipers (Jewish Virtual Library, Stalingrad). The battle was brutal, with constant artillery bombing on the city, and Red Army soldiers used the destroyed buildings as a way to sneak past the enemy (Jewish Virtual Library, Stalingrad). The winter of 1942-1943 was another extremely cold winter and once again brought down German forces, which were already being diverted to the west to fight American and British troops that landed for Operation Torch to take North Africa (Jewish Virtual Library, Stalingrad). Eventually, Soviet forces took back the city and forced a German surrender, resulting in massive drop in German personnel (Jewish Virtual Library, Stalingrad). The Soviets continued the offensive after this.

**Soviets Advance to Berlin**

In the next two years, the Soviets would make major land gains from the Axis through their continued counteroffensive (USHMM, “The Soviet Union and the Eastern Front”). The Germans attempted one last offensive in the summer of 1943, but were badly beaten by the now much better developed Red Army (USHMM). German attempts
to hold the front were close to useless now; they had to divert many troops to fight the
American and British(USHMM).

**Germany Surrenders**

By early 1945, the Soviets had encircled Berlin along with the other allies, and a
post-war plan for the occupation had been made. Hitler created a defense plan but it
was not enough to stop the power of the allied armies, and committed suicide in a
bunker as the allies were closing in on the center of the city(Remme, “The Battle for
Berlin in World War Two”). Sustained waves of artillery shells had left the city in
ruins(Remme, Battle for Berlin). Germany declared unconditional surrender on May 7,
1945(Remme, Battle for Berlin).

**Aftermath and Conclusion**

The US-Soviet alliance would not last much longer. With the end of the war the
British empire declined and China ended with a civil war, leaving the US and the Soviet
Union as the two dominant global powers. At the start of the post-war period, Germany
was split into four occupation zones, but the real problem was with Berlin(UNC, “The
End of WW2 and the Division of Europe”). The sectors of Berlin controlled by the allies
was in the middle of the Soviet sector, and Stalin attempted to cut off all supplies to
West Berlin by initiating the Berlin Blockade(UNC, Division of Europe). But also, the
parts occupied by France, Britain, and the US were united into West Germany, a
western capitalist country with a market economy, while the Soviets established East
Germany which fell under highly centralized communist rule(UNC, Division of Europe).
As a result, neither side could simply tolerate the other’s ideology, and tensions rose
between the two former allies (UNC, Division of Europe). Their initial cooperation in the war was soon forgotten, and the Soviets showed that both of their alliances with ideological opponents resulted in tension; they were invaded by the Nazis for being a communist state and had an ideological conflict with the US because of post-war decisions and their differences.
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