

The bedfellows chosen by Stalin in 1939 became the worst nightmare of the Soviet Union by the end of the war. Here is one very brief attempt to bring an historical perspective to:

A Complex Relationship: The Soviets and Allies Before and During WWII

by
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From the early years of German resurgence, isolationism was strong in the US and elsewhere. The span from 1918 until Hitler's emergence in 1929 and rise to power in 1933 was ever so brief. Memory of the stupidity and carnage of WWI was fresh in mind. Most leaders were not yet prepared to resist resurgent German nationalism as global depression loomed. The most famous incidence and the most costly of all compromises between total isolationism and total war was Chamberlain's attempt to appease Hitler in Munich. At first, the West seemed content to stand aside and let Germany feed on her weaker neighbors but the Soviets went beyond standing complacently aside, as we shall see.

By 1939, Hitler had become a power that all political leaders knew could not be ignored. But, the US public was determined to resist another "great adventure" in Europe and they made this quite clear to their elected representatives. Regardless, however, senior leaders in the United States began to plan for war and the industrial power of the United States began to quietly consider war mobilization, both from an economic and a survival perspective. As Hitler became more powerful and adventuresome, the United States isolationists held firm. But, a series of events occurred in August 1939 that galvanized the British and French and set the stage for US material involvement in the coming war.

Nazi-Soviet Pact negotiations began on August 11, 1939. The Nazi-Soviet Pact was signed on August 21, 1939. This hit the free world like a thunderbolt. On September 1, 1939, the day Germany invaded Poland despite Hitler's promise to protect Poland's western frontier, Britain and France declared war.

As the war between the Axis powers (which at this time it can be argued included the Soviet Union through the Nazi-Soviet Pact) and the Allies (which at this time did not include the United States) heated up, the United States began to yield by degrees to strong British pressure for increasing support to the Allied forces, spurred on with significant power by increasing US ship losses to Germany in the North Atlantic. United States support to Great Britain surged in 1939-1941 as the industrial mobilization of America wound into high gear. This mobilization became, along with time and hunger, the Allies "real weapons against Germany" (Meinecke, Briefwechsel, p. 370, ltr to Siegfried Kachler, 28 April 1941). Scholars agree that among other important elements in the victory over the Axis was the partnership between the Allies and the Soviet Union that came after Hitler invaded Russia on June 22, 1941.

Even after war had raged in Europe for nearly three years, with the British being severely

injured, the United States remained a non-combatant. In fact, it is well to recall that after the Japanese attack on December 7, 1941, launched American into the war, Hitler, with astounding strategic stupidity, declared war on the United States four days later, thus sealing the fate of the Third Reich with the same certainty Yamamoto prophesied following Pearl Harbor. Had Hitler not made this greatest of his many ill-advised decisions, scholars have speculated that the outcome of WWII could have been dramatically different. With no Hitler declaration of war, the industrial power of the United States would have been focused on defeating Japan. The war in Europe would have gone on with significantly reduced support from the United States to the Allies.

As it turned out, however, the strategic reality after Hitler's declaration was that unless the US focused on Germany first, the Allied forces in Europe would fall to Germany. After Hitler invaded the British Isles, it is suggested, he would have successfully developed his nuclear arsenal and jet fighter-bomber equipped Luftwaffe, and most likely would have been impossible to defeat without a nuclear exchange between the US and Germany. Hitler could have exploited these very potent capabilities against the other large enemy to his east, as well. But, Hitler did make this egotistical blunder, he did declare war on the United States, and the United States found herself in a very sorry state, indeed: German military power raging with relative impunity in Western Europe, and the remains of the Pacific fleet settling to the bottom of Pearl Harbor.

The dilemma of how to prosecute what was destined to become global war was resolved by a policy known as "Germany First." The United States lived for years with the dastardly sneak attack of December 7, 1941, giving only token support for the war in the Pacific until the solid foothold gouged out at Normandy in June 1944 promised Allied victory in Europe. Only as the balance of aggression began to tilt toward the Allies could the US turn full force on Japan.

One of the weapons that Hitler used to weaken his Pact partner, the Soviet Union, for Germany's intended "kill" was the Allied Powers. Hitler saw his Pact relationship with the Soviet Union as an act of war against the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union saw her relationship with Germany as a means to survive German hegemony in Europe with the Soviet totalitarian system intact. When Hitler attacked Stalin, the weakened West accepted the recently belligerent Soviets as new Allies against the wolf now shaking their alliance by the throat.

Stalin became a good Allied partner in WWII. It is true that had it not been for Soviet sacrifice one would seriously question the capability of the Allies to have executed and capitalized upon their audacious invasion of France. It is true that the heroic Russian forces and the Russian people suffered horrible losses during the war, losses more horrific than any other nation. Most sources estimate Soviet dead in WWII at more than 20 million. It is quite true that the course of the war from the first stirring of German nationalism until the fall of Berlin came at a price in blood that was not evenly spread among allies. As these losses mounted, Stalin pleaded for a second European front to pinch the Nazi war machine and dilute their combat resources more quickly. He wanted to relieve pressure on the eastern

front and accused the western nations of buying their victory with Russian blood. This, too, is true.

It was so because of Hitler's total devotion to the destruction of all things Soviet and his desire to accomplish what Napoleon had failed to do. Hitler slaughtered the Soviets; the Allies did not. It was so because of the excellent Soviet army and the total war practiced by outstanding Russian leadership on the battlefield. And, it was true because the United States was not yet prepared to fight -- the US Army was a rather miserable disgrace in 1939...and did not really come of age until just before Normandy. In the interceding years, the US Army and its fledgling Air Corps prosecuted coalition warfare as best they could with light armor, little training, and aircraft of cloth and sticks, all the while building up an overwhelming force to finish Hitler once the Allies hit Normandy's beaches.

The US strategy beginning in 1942 was to reach a decisive point with Germany as quickly as possible without crippling US capability to then turn full fury on Japan. Stalin's primary goal and Roosevelt's primary goal were identical. Their secondary goals were not.

Stalin finally got his second front, which was expanded when Churchill could not be dissuaded from attacking the "soft underbelly" of the Reich, pushing US forces along with other Allied forces north through Italy in a bloody fight many think may have been avoided without endangering the outcome of the war. Along with the Soviet pressure in the east and the Allied invasion of France, however, this Italian campaign did speed the end of the war.

It is not supportable, unfortunately, despite Soviet losses that included an unbelievable 3.70 million soldier deaths in German prisoner of war camps alone, that Germany was already defeated by June 6, 1944, when the Allies invaded France. And, as we have tried to outline above, there are very good reasons the Allies were slow to invade Europe, not the least of which was the ruthless capability and efficiency of the Nazi war machine. The long years of battle on the western front and the bitter Russian winter had destroyed the German army attacking Moscow with the same cold steel as it had the French in an earlier century. The German high command had considered their ability to win a vain and improbable hope as soon as the sleeping giant of US industrial power began to stir.

Nevertheless, Soviet sacrifices and German intelligencia premonitions aside, after the evacuation of Allied forces from Dunkirk on May 31 - June 1, 1940, the task of successfully invading and carrying through to victory was impossible without overwhelming force and determination of Biblical proportions. Neither the force nor the determination was present until December 1941, and the force was not present until 1944. When the force was released with determination, the end was never in doubt. The cost to reach the end was the only variable. Within 15 bloody months the end would come and as it drew closer more United States resources would begin to flow to the Pacific.

Whereas the Soviet strategy was dominated by a large pool of soldiers with limited logistics (but with a strong ally in the bitter winter and vast reaches of their country), the American strategy was dominated by overwhelming forces, massive firepower, sustainable resupply, and conservation of US life. These two approaches to battle were born and shaped by

circumstances and by temperament but also by the location of the battle and the time and resources available to prepare.

In the face of horrible Nazi culture and conduct, with war guaranteed by the conflict of visions between Hitler's Germany and western liberalism, the Soviets began the war with actions that were as selfish as America's isolationism. After the war was raging, each country acted with self interest tempered by the necessity of cooperation.

In looking back, one is hard pressed to see a better alliance and a better outcome. One is also struck by the huge cost of victory in Soviet -- particularly Russian -- lives. In the final analysis, United States of America has a large debt of gratitude to Russia for the sacrifices of the brave Russian people during these terrible years. Had the killing fields been in Tennessee rather than Europe the war would have been a very different beast indeed.