

# Naval War College Review

---

Volume 41  
Number 4 *Autumn*

Article 13

---

1988

## Stalin's War

Sam J. Tangredi  
*U.S. Navy*

Ernst Topitsch

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Tangredi, Sam J. and Topitsch, Ernst (1988) "Stalin's War," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 41 : No. 4 , Article 13.  
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol41/iss4/13>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

accuracy. See, for example, his rehashing of a story from William Stevenson's *A Man Called Intrepid* (p. 13), a flawed tale from a flawed and notoriously inaccurate book.

---

Lieutenant Commander Sam J. Tangredi, U.S. Navy

Topitsch, Ernst. *Stalin's War*, trans. A. Taylor and B. E. Taylor. New York: St. Martin's, 1987. 160pp. \$19.95

**S**ubtitled *A Radical New Theory of the Origins of the Second World War*, *Stalin's War* is not just another revisionist interpretation of an oft-told story. It is undoubtedly the boldest revision yet attempted, representing an authentically novel approach to answering history's greatest enigma: what were Adolf Hitler's strategic goals in launching an apparently suicidal war against all other world powers?

Previous efforts to answer this question have focused on the role of Hitler as architect of the war and ultimate world decision maker. There are various shadings of explanation: Hitler was a psychotic, he miscalculated the character of the Allies, he was a military genius who overextended his forces, he was goaded by the capitalists, etc., etc.

Yet, all the varying interpretations agree on the central role of this one man, although some revisionist writers have passed small bits of conspiratorial guilt on to others—to an uncompromising Churchill or bellicose Roosevelt. But, by consensus, it is still Hitler's war; written, directed, produced, and starring the Reichsführer, who—most fortunately—loses control of the production in the end, although only after the Continent is laid to waste and whole ethnic groups destroyed. However, despite the consensus on the focal point, the question still seems to defy a definitive explanation—what did Hitler really want?

To answer the question, Professor Topitsch inverts it. As a starting point, he posits that it is impossible to determine what Hitler wanted because the Führer did not know what he wanted. Beyond “his twin obsessions” of *Lebensraum* in the East and Teutonic racial superiority, Hitler did no coherent planning and had only the vaguest strategic aims. Controlling the world was grandiose even from a Nazi perspective, and Hitler was often heard to proclaim his regrets at the multifront conflict resulting from continual blitzkrieg.

Concluding that Hitler started a war that was never in his strategic interests (since he had already achieved his immediate aims in the West, without war), Topitsch is forced to tackle the question from the opposite direction and ask: in whose strategic interest was the war that pit Germany against the democracies? While not attempting to deny Hitler's personal

responsibility for the tragedy (and indeed he makes a strenuous effort to disassociate himself from any who might), Topitsch concentrates on the role of the other important European dictator who, paradoxically, provided Hitler with the most assistance in starting the war and then sacrificed the most to defeat him.

Stalin's role as Hitler's ally has been supplanted in most histories by his role as Hitler's enemy. Yet if any leader could be said to have achieved his enunciated objectives through the Second World War, it was Josef Stalin. When the Red Army entered Berlin, Stalin's prewar strategic objectives—effective Communist Party control over Russian society, the expansion of political influence beyond Soviet borders, a permanent buffer region under tight control, and Soviet emergence as the dominant power in Europe—had become reality.

Amongst Soviet sources and German intelligence reports, Topitsch finds documentary evidence that seems to suggest a relationship between the outcome of the war and its origin. The portrait that emerges is that of a deliberate Soviet policy to encourage a war to exhaust both Germany and the West. This was to be accomplished by a planned alliance with and then against the Facists. The first phase would give the Germans confidence in a secure eastern flank while defeating Britain and France; the second—after the German Army had been weakened—would turn the flank into a decisive front.

In this view, Hitler's war for the expansion of the Reich is actually Lenin's predicted final conflict of the imperialist states—the war from which communism would emerge to dominate the industrial world. "We must hasten this war" was the lesson that Lenin tried to drum into his lieutenants. The conventional interpretation is that Trotsky listened and Stalin did not, the latter preferring to build "socialism in one state." Topitsch denies this interpretation; in his theory, Stalin is biding his time until a Hitler comes along, to be first pushed and then crushed. He quotes Stalin's musings from as early as 1925: "If war is to break out, we won't be able to watch in idleness; we will have to enter the fray, but we will be the last ones to do it, in order to put the decisive weight into the scales; a weight that should tip the balance."

The German-Soviet alliance against Poland was, according to Topitsch, the masterful stroke of Soviet strategy: it assured the Germans of a quick success, insured that the eventual German attack on Russia would be temporarily delayed, and provided the actual impetus for a German war against France and Britain. This long-term objective of the alliance was revealed in a telegram sent by the Soviet Foreign Office on 8 March 1941: "The Soviet Union will not interfere with the German action against Greece: this is needed to exert pressure on the English colonies, to threaten the Suez Canal, to hold up supplies for English Troops in Africa. We

must . . . solicit the goodwill of the Greek people, who must fight the German invasion. . . . [But] we have no intention of endangering the German-Russian treaty, which is necessary to fulfill our most urgent aim, namely, the destruction of the British Empire.”

Such quotations—although anecdotal in the scientific sense—lead the author to conclude that the Soviets viewed Hitler as the “battering ram against the allegedly strongest bastion of capitalism, Great Britain.” Topitsch argues that the origins of the Second World War can never be fully explained until historians realize that the Soviets took deliberate steps to ensure Hitler would indeed go to war, while insulating themselves until ready to unleash the antifascist war and become the “savior” of Europe. In light of this plan, Soviet support for German interwar rearmament and effective betrayal of the German Communist movement are no longer inexplicable.

Of course, the idea that the origin of the Second World War lay in Soviet strategic manipulation only makes sense if Hitler is viewed as a supporting actor in a Stalinist production. Indeed, in Topitsch’s play, Hitler is confined to the role that contemporary Soviet accounts attempted to describe for him. The author takes his cue from a July 1940 essay in the Soviet journal *Red Dawn* that put Soviet foreign policy towards Hitler in a Shakespearean perspective: “Like a new Napoleon, Hitler is running amok throughout Europe, conquering great countries, terrifying the placid bourgeoisie. . . . When the work is done, the conqueror of the world, with his fellow criminals, will end up where he belongs—on the rubbish heap of history. The Moor has served his purpose. The Moor can go.” Thus runs the author’s argument; but is it convincing?

From a purely documentary perspective, the answer must be no. The book is just too brief, and there is no “smoking gun” to convict Stalin in the court of history as the primary mastermind of the conflict. However, as the author makes very clear, *Stalin’s War* is not meant to be a history. It is a theory. As such it can only be evaluated on its plausibility and ability to build a model comprised of the available facts. As theory, it is quite plausible and the case presented is well-argued. It may be grossly incomplete; the author relies on the research of others, primarily Grigore Gafencu, George F. Kennan, Phillip W. Fabry, and Andreas Hillgruber. However, the author’s proclaimed objective is to stimulate historical research in a completely new direction. Based on this criterion, the book should be a definite success—stress the “should be.” In terms of its theoretical merits, *Stalin’s War* is provocative revisionism at its best. However, revisionists of leftist leanings (currently the dominant faction) may find its politics wrong.

All readers intrigued by the Second World War, and certainly all historians, owe this brief book the time it requires—approaching it with an open mind. Like all new or revisionist theories, the book is controversial,

as it is meant to be. Unfortunately, political and emotional factors may confine the audience to a few brave souls. Some may find it too disturbing for future East-West détente. Marxists will dub it neo-fascist. Others will assume it is an attempt to minimize German guilt. I suspect that, in true dictatorial fashion, Stalin would have thoroughly enjoyed the book's portrayal of his cunning and power. After reading it, accurate or not, he would have ordered the author shot.

---

Treverton, Gregory F. *Covert Action—The Limits of Intervention in the Postwar World*. New York: Basic Books, 1987. 293pp. \$19.95

*Covert Action* is one of those books that one does not have to agree with to appreciate. Zbigniew Brzezinski, for example, finds it “valuable” even though he strongly disagrees with its conclusions. I, too, disagree with its conclusions. I, too, think the book is valuable. This is not simply my charitable nature coming through. Rather, covert action is a very difficult topic to come to grips with, and Mr. Treverton's book contributes to an informed debate—up to a point.

Part of the difficulty for Americans is that we, as a nation, are fairly new to the game. Sun Tzu was thinking about covert action some 2,400 years ago. The czars had an organized intelligence service 400 years ago. The CIA, on the other hand, was established by the National Security Act of 1947—less than half a century ago. We simply have not had much time to come to grips with the issue.

A second problem is that covert action, by definition, is difficult to describe. The thing that differen-

tiates covert action from run-of-the-mill secret activities is the element of “plausible deniability”—hiding the sponsor of the act. There is not much of a data base. Most covert actions never become a part of our consciousness.

A third and final problem is that almost no one is neutral about covert action. Debates rarely focus on utility or effectiveness. Usually, the argument quickly zeroes in on moral and ethical issues. What passes for knowledge is usually opinion—for understanding, usually supposition.

The bottom line is, regrettably, that there is little grist for the mill of informed debate. *Covert Action* performs a valuable service by providing at least some of the background needed and moving the debate toward more useful issues. It is not (nor can any one volume be) *the* answer. To understand the good and the bad of this book, one should approach it from three different perspectives: history, issues, and prescriptions.

**History:** Students of the history of U.S. covert operations will find this book interesting for its coverage of the early years. Mr. Treverton was a staff member on the first Senate Select