

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 345

### “Operation Barbarossa”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

June 22, 1941 became the day Adolf Hitler executed the military operation he had dreamed of for more than eight years: the campaign to destroy Bolshevism and turn Eastern Europe into a German colony.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 345. Operation Barbarossa.

All the way back in episode one, I identified ten Great Powers in the world of the early twentieth century. After the First World War, I struck two of them off the list: Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire. That leaves eight.

In the world of 1941, one of the eight, France, is defeated and occupied. Two others, Germany and Italy are allied as the Axis. So that leaves us with six...let's call them power blocs.

In 1941, people are still used to the idea that the Royal Navy is the world's indisputable master of the seas, and that “Britannia rules the waves.” Why does Britannia rule the waves? Because Britain is the center of a global Empire, the pieces of which can only communicate and trade over the seas.

By 1941, the United States Navy has reached something like parity with the Royal Navy, but this doesn't matter much, because the US and the UK see eye to eye on most international issues and have been maintaining cordial relations for going on a century now. The US and the UK have an implicit naval alliance in support of free access to the world's oceans for the purposes of trade.

The fact that Britannia rules the waves, or Britannia and Columbia jointly rule the waves, has important economic consequences for the other four power blocs. Consider the case of the Soviet Union. The USSR is the heir to the Russian Empire, an empire built overland rather than

overseas. Russia doesn't have much of a navy, but it doesn't need one, not so long as every corner of the Russian Empire, excuse me, the USSR, is accessible overland.

Access to the seas for the sake of participating in global trade is less important to the Soviet Union than to most other countries. The Soviet Union has sufficient population, agriculture, raw materials, and industry that it can get along well enough even if it were denied access to the seas.

To put it another way, the Soviet Union can't be blockaded. Well, it can be, but the blockade wouldn't affect it very much, because the USSR is self-sufficient. The technical term for a political entity that is economically self-sufficient is *autarky*.

We could quibble over details, but the USSR is essentially an autarky, and its Communist government under Stalin has embraced autarky as an ideological principle. The USSR does not want to depend on imports, because the Communists don't want to be dependent on capitalism, for ideological reasons.

The United States is also an autarky, or it could be one if it chose, although America has always been an active participant in world trade, even before it became an independent nation. The US doesn't mind being dependent on capitalism; it doesn't mind at all.

China is a poor country, but in 1941 it is in its fourth year of fighting back against a Japanese invasion. You'll note that the Japanese have all but closed off China's international trade, but the Chinese fight on, demonstrating that China is also an autarky.

Japan is not an autarky, but boy does it want to be one. It eyes the British, French, Dutch, and American colonial holdings in East Asia and the Southwest Pacific, and thinks "all that should be mine."

And then there's Germany. Germany is in the same position as Japan. It is not an autarky either. The Germans know that all too well. The lesson of the last war was that Germany can be starved into submission. Its Nazi government is determined never to allow that to happen again. As the Japanese eye Western colonial holdings in their neighborhood, the Germans covet the fertile soil and the vast plains in the East. Hitler called it *Lebensraum*, but you could simply say, Germany wants to be an autarky. If Germany controlled the breadbasket that is Ukraine and the USSR's wealth of petroleum and minerals, Germany could become a power to rival the UK or the US.

And to this ambition to become an autarky, you can add a layer of Nazi racism, which holds that Germans are smarter, more civilized, and more industrious than the Slavs. The people currently in control of Russia's riches are too backward to exploit them effectively. Imagine what advanced, civilized Germans could do with them. No one would ever be able to get in Germany's way again.

In other words, in addition to the ideological conflict, you might say the invasion of the Soviet Union was a colonial conflict. In German eyes, Russians and other ethnic groups in the East were

savage, barbaric peoples incapable of governing themselves in a civilized manner or of properly exploiting the economic resources they controlled; therefore Germany would assume control of their lands.

These are the reasons for the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. Still you might wonder: why invade Russia when Britain remains unsubdued? Why voluntarily assume the burden of fighting the two-front war Germany has so far been able to avoid? The answer is simple. The war against Britain is an unfortunate necessity. The war against Russia is the war Hitler has always wanted. He said so as early as February 1933, just days after becoming chancellor. And now, at last, he is going to get his wish. You can add to that Hitler's belief that if the Soviet Union falls, the British will at last be forced to talk peace.

I've been saying that the Second World War is best understood as five separate conflicts that expanded and merged into one global conflict. The first war was the Japanese invasion of China. The second was the Italian campaign for hegemony in the Mediterranean. The third was the war between Germany and the Western Allies that was triggered when Germany invaded Poland, and please note that invading Poland was a precondition to invading the USSR. And now, here we are at the fourth war, the Nazi ideological campaign to destroy Communism and claim the natural wealth of European Russia for Germany.

You're going to have to wait a few more months for the fifth war, but it's coming.

As the campaign to take Greece and Crete played out in May 1941, Hitler remained at his vacation home, the Berghof. The Germans were hoping to catch the Soviet Union by surprise, and this was part of the plan: to conceal the pending invasion by giving the impression that nothing important was going on in German government.

Even so, there were rumors. Germans couldn't possibly miss the movement of three million soldiers to the Eastern frontier. Propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels leaked to the German press that Joseph Stalin would shortly be making a state visit to Berlin and preparations were already under way. The implication was that the concord between Germany and the Soviet Union was still firm. Then he leaked to the Swiss press that Germany was preparing an invasion of Britain, and followed that up with an essay in the Nazi Party newspaper, *Völkischer Beobachter* on June 13, nine days before the invasion. The essay was titled "Crete as an Example" and seemed to hint that the invasion of Crete was a preview of a pending invasion of Britain. As the crowning touch, Goebbels then ordered the German police to confiscate the June 13 issue, after it had already been printed and distributed, to create the impression that the essay had inadvertently given away a state secret.

On June 2, Hitler met with Mussolini at the Brenner Pass, but he never mentioned the pending invasion to his brother dictator. Hitler would inform Mussolini of the invasion by diplomatic note, which he arranged to be delivered less than an hour before the invasion began.

On June 3, Hitler met with the Japanese ambassador, Ōshima Hiroshi, and did inform him of the pending invasion, and that Finland and Romania would also be involved. He emphasized the importance of secrecy and asked the Japanese to be discreet with this information. Hitler told Ōshima that it was up to the Japanese government to decide whether it wanted to participate in the war against Bolshevism, but he indicated Japanese support would be welcome. But Japan had just signed a non-aggression agreement with the Soviet Union two months earlier, and would choose to honor that agreement.

On June 12, Hitler met with Romanian fascist dictator Ion Antonescu in Munich and informed him of the date of the invasion. Antonescu greeted the news with enthusiasm and pledged Romanian support.

On June 18, Hitler issued a message to German soldiers on the Eastern Front. Hundreds of thousands of copies were printed for distribution once the war began. The workers in the print shop were held there for four days for security reasons, and were not permitted to go home until after the invasion began.

Adolf Hitler himself, despite his earlier confidence that the Soviet Union would pop like a soap bubble—his words—became anxious in the final days before the invasion began. Reportedly he began experiencing insomnia and took sleeping pills.

Late Friday night, June 20, the OKW, the Wehrmacht Supreme Command, issued the codeword *Dortmund*, which indicated that the invasion would begin in the early morning hours of Sunday, June 22.

That Sunday morning, at 3:15 AM Berlin time, 4:15 AM Moscow time, thousands of Luftwaffe planes roared across the frontier to attack Soviet airfields and bomb targets in the USSR. Artillery opened fire on Red Army positions up and down the front. One hundred and four German infantry divisions, 15 motorized infantry divisions, and 19 panzer divisions began the largest invasion in military history along a front line 1,800 kilometers long.

At 5:30 AM, radio stations around Germany played Franz Liszt's "Les Préludes," music personally selected by Joseph Goebbels for the occasion. He then read out a statement from the *Führer* announcing the invasion and framing it as a preemptive strike against a pending Soviet invasion of Germany.

[music: Liszt, *Transcendental Etudes*, No. 8]

Large numbers of higher-echelon Red Army officers had been imprisoned or executed during Stalin's purges. Their replacements had been appointed based on their political reliability rather than any demonstrated skill in leading soldiers. The role of political commissars was expanded; these were political officers, equal in rank to the unit commanders they were attached to. Their primary role was to insure the loyalty of their unit commander. Every commanding officer in the

Red Army, from company commanders up to division commanders, had a supervising political officer assigned to them. This was an innovation originally devised by the late Leon Trotsky during the Civil War.

The purges left the Red Army with an unskilled and inexperienced officer corps, to the detriment of the Army's fighting ability. This became all too obvious during the invasion of Eastern Poland in 1939 and the Winter War, soon after. The Red Army had also been greatly expanded since 1939, with over a hundred new divisions mobilized. As you might expect, these new divisions consisted of inexperienced soldiers led by inexperienced officers. The need for experienced officers became so great and so glaring that a majority of the officers who had been dismissed during the purges were eventually reinstated.

Stalin and the Red Army were well aware of Hitler's real feelings about the Soviet Union; Hitler had been accommodating enough to write them down in plain German in *Mein Kampf*. Germany was clearly the number one military threat to the USSR, and the Army planned accordingly. After the Soviet Union acquired the Baltic States, Eastern Poland, and a slice of Romania, Stalin moved the Army out of its line of prepared defenses along the old Soviet frontier, a line sometimes referred to as the "Stalin Line," to a more forward defensive line along the new Soviet frontier. He ordered that every nook and cranny of the new Soviet western frontier be garrisoned, though this led to an inefficient deployment. Neither had the Red Army enough time to prepare its new defensive positions before the Germans attacked.

The non-aggression pact between the Soviet Union and Germany was never a comfortable arrangement for either party; their ideological differences were severe. A key goal of both the Nazi Party and the Communist Party was the destruction of the other's state. Even so, Stalin agreed to the pact and meant to honor it; Stalin and the Party expected that the fascists and the capitalist-imperialists would destroy each other; then Communism would assume control over the ruins of those failed states. The best strategy for the Soviet Union was therefore to bide its time and avoid getting drawn into the conflict.

Stalin felt confident that Hitler would not attack the USSR; he would never be so foolish as to open a second front against the Soviet Union so long as he still had a hostile Britain on his western flank. German moves into the Balkans, through Greece, and on to Crete seemed to confirm that Hitler was eyeing Egypt, not Russia, as his next military target. Soviet intelligence reported that the German Army had not been issued winter uniforms or overcoats, and obviously no one would be so foolish as to invade Russia without first preparing for cold weather.

Neither was Stalin willing to give the Germans an excuse to pick a fight. The Soviet Union had trade pacts with Germany, one signed in August 1939 and a second in January 1940. The Soviet government was scrupulous about producing the promised trade goods at the promised time, to underscore the point that Germany had more to gain from peaceful relations with the USSR than it could hope to win in a war.

In April 1941, Japan signed its own non-aggression agreement with the Soviet Union. Following the signing ceremony in Moscow, Stalin turned up in person at the railroad station to see off Japanese foreign minister Matsuoka Yōsuke as he departed for home. Among the crowd of well-wishers, Stalin spotted Hans Krebs, the German military attaché. He went to Krebs, slapped him on the back, and said, “We must always remain friends, whatever happens.” Krebs thought he detected anxiety behind Stalin’s forced geniality.

Stalin interpreted the non-aggression pact with Japan as another clear indication that Germany had no plans to attack the USSR. If it had, it surely wouldn’t have allowed its partner Japan to make peace with Moscow.

In May 1941, the Soviet news agency TASS distributed an article that dismissed rumors of an imminent German attack on the USSR. This article was received in the German government with great delight and a certain degree of amazement. Were the Russians really that clueless?

The British government had been sending the Soviet government warnings that the Germans intended to attack them since autumn of 1940. Stalin believed these warnings to be British disinformation meant to provoke a conflict between the Soviet Union and Germany and thus take some of the pressure off the UK.

In 1940, the Swedish mathematician Arne Beurling performed the remarkable feat of deciphering the German T52 teleprinter. These teleprinters, manufactured by Siemens & Halske, transmitted encrypted messages by cable, using a mechanical encryption method far more complex than the Enigma machine. That was because Enigma had to be small and portable, while the T52 was a large and heavy machine meant for permanent placement and thus could be more sophisticated. After the German conquest of Norway, the Wehrmacht regularly sent messages to and from Norway via cables that ran through Sweden. Swedish intelligence tapped the line, but could not read the messages. Beurling solved the problem in two weeks, using only pen and paper. The Swedes had been monitoring German military communications ever since and in 1941, warned the Soviet government about the coming invasion. This warning was not taken seriously either, in part because the Swedes would not divulge the source of their information.

And after Hitler told Japanese ambassador Ōshima about the coming invasion on June 3, Ōshima cabled this news to the foreign ministry in Tokyo. The Japanese were unaware that both British and American military intelligence had broken their diplomatic code. Both countries, the US and the UK, shared the contents of Ōshima’s cable with Moscow, but Stalin again chose to believe this was an imperialist ruse to trick him into provoking a confrontation with the Germans.

On June 16, six days before the attack, the Soviet NKVD submitted a report to Comrade Stalin which presented evidence that the Germans had assembled a large army along the frontier with the USSR, that their preparations were now complete, and an invasion appeared imminent.

Defense minister Semyon Timoshenko and his deputy, Georgy Zhukov, wanted to put the Red Army on alert, but Stalin overruled them.

By now you're probably thinking that Stalin was being pretty clueless. You're not wrong, but in defense of the General Secretary, let me point out that by June 1941, he'd been hearing predictions of an imminent German invasion for almost a year. In May 1941, Stalin did go so far as to mobilize thirty reserve divisions and send them to the western frontier as a precaution. He likely believed that was an adequate response to the rumors.

Even so, Stalin was by June 1941 getting multiple bits of intelligence from unrelated sources, all of which were pointing in the same direction. One or two worrisome reports could be dismissed as background noise, but when you're getting four, five, six independent reports all saying the same thing, it's time to get off the couch.

And I'm not done yet. The Soviet embassy in Berlin got hold of a German-Russian phrasebook being distributed to soldiers in the German Army. It included information on how to pronounce in Russian such phrases as "Hands up!" "Are you a Communist?" and "Where is the collective farm chairman?"

In Chongqing, the provisional capital of China, the German military attaché mentioned the pending invasion to Chinese officials. One of those present was Yan Baohang, a Communist spy. Yan reported the conversation to Zhou Enlai, who passed it on to Mao Zedong, who forwarded it to Soviet intelligence on June 20, two days before the invasion.

The German ambassador to the Soviet Union, Friedrich-Werner von der Schulenburg, had been vocally discouraging any talk of war with the Soviet Union within German diplomatic circles, because he believed Germany had more to gain from its current relationship with Russia. He warned the Foreign Office in Berlin of the size of the Red Army and the degree to which the Communists had built up Soviet industry in the Ural Mountains and beyond, out of reach of any conceivable German invasion. Because he was known to oppose war with the Soviet Union, von der Schulenburg was kept out of the loop and not informed of the Operation Barbarossa until the day before it began. Nevertheless, he suspected an invasion was in the works and passed his suspicions along to the Soviet foreign ministry. Stalin's reaction on hearing about this was to express surprise that "[d]isinformation has now reached ambassadorial level!"

But you shouldn't think Stalin completely ignored security threats to the USSR. In mid-June, he ordered more than 130,000 Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian troublemakers who wouldn't accept the integration of their homelands into the workers' paradise rounded up and deported to Siberia.

Finally, on Saturday evening, June 21, a soldier in the German Army's 75<sup>th</sup> infantry division named Alfred Liskow, a Communist, upon receiving word that they would be attacking the Soviet Union tomorrow morning at dawn, escaped from his unit and swam across the Bug River

to Soviet-controlled territory to warn them. Liskow was still being interrogated by the NKVD the following morning when the Germans attacked.

Liskow, by the way, would be sent to Siberia in 1942, and there is no known record of what became of him afterward. Presumably he died there.

At 1:00 AM on Sunday the 22<sup>nd</sup>, a directive was issued to Red Army units along the frontier to ready themselves for combat, although they were also cautioned to avoid provocative actions. Most units only received this directive after the German attack had already begun.

The Red Army was caught by surprise. The German Army had about three million soldiers along the frontier, plus an additional half million Romanian and Finnish allied soldiers. The Red Army had about 2.9 million, slightly fewer than the Germans. The Red Army had substantially larger numbers of tanks and artillery than the Wehrmacht, but the Red Army suffered from lack of training and unpreparedness. Logistics was also a problem across Russia's vast spaces, as it had been in the last war. Tanks and artillery aren't worth much if you can't supply them with fuel and shells.

The Germans advanced along the entire frontier, taking Soviet border guards by surprise. Many were killed in their underwear. German commandos and anti-Communist Ukrainian fighters dressed in Red Army uniforms infiltrated or parachuted behind Soviet lines to capture bridges and cut telephone lines. Senior Soviet military commanders quickly discovered they were unable to contact their units to issue orders or determine what was happening on the front lines. German panzer units advanced rapidly into Soviet territory; some were able to capture Red Army supply dumps.

The Luftwaffe bombed targets across the front, including 66 Soviet airfields, where planes were neatly lined up beside the runways, waiting for their pilots. The Luftwaffe destroyed at least 1,500 Soviet aircraft on the ground on the first day. Some estimates run much higher. The Germans lost 35 planes.

When the attack began, Joseph Stalin was sleeping in his dacha, outside Moscow. I should explain that a dacha is a Russian thing, and in 1941 it was also a Soviet thing. It's a small cottage or cabin in the country used as a vacation home.

General Zhukov telephoned the dacha at 4:45 AM, just minutes after the attack began, and insisted Comrade Stalin be awakened. Zhukov reported to Stalin that German bombers had attacked the Soviet naval base at Sevastopol and there were unconfirmed reports of other air attacks at several other locations across the country. Stalin ordered a Politburo meeting in the Kremlin in one hour, that is, 5:45AM. In the meantime, he told Zhukov, the Red Army was not to attack.



At the Politburo meeting, Stalin still refused to believe Hitler was attacking. He suggested that the bombing in Sevastopol was some kind of mistake and ordered foreign minister Molotov to contact Ambassador von der Schulenburg for an explanation. Schulenburg met with Molotov and regretfully informed him that Germany had declared war on the Soviet Union. Molotov brought this news back to the Politburo, which received it in stunned silence.

About 7:00 that morning, Stalin issued an order to the Red Army to attack all enemy forces that had crossed the border and to the Air Force to attack targets in German territory. Two hours later, he issued a second order to attack German forces without regard for borders. You can see from these two orders that the Kremlin did not yet have a clear idea of what was happening on the front lines. In fact, most soldiers along the frontier were either dead, wounded, captured, or fleeing.

Lavrenty Beria's NKVD ordered the execution of some 20,000 political prisoners held in the Baltic States, Eastern Poland, and Bessarabia as a precautionary measure, so that the Germans would not be able to free them.

The German invasion force was organized into three army groups: Army Group North was assigned to march through the Baltic States and capture Leningrad. It advanced with astonishing rapidity. On the fourth day of the invasion, the Red Army attempted to fall back to a defensive line along the Daugava River, which flows through Latvia, but a German panzer corps had already captured a bridge across that river and breached their line before they could form it. On the tenth day, the Red Army had fallen back to Lake Peipus, the long lake that forms most of the border between Estonia and Russia. The lake made it possible for the Red Army to concentrate its defenses in the narrow strip of land between the lake and the Baltic Sea, but a few days later, the Germans captured Pskov, at the southern end of the lake, thus flanking the Russian defensive line.

Farther south, Army Group Center simply surrounded and bypassed major Red Army defensive positions, such as the old fortress in Brest-Litovsk. On June 27, advancing panzer units surrounded a large Soviet force near Minsk. Most of the Red Army's Western Front was destroyed, and allow me to remind you that what most armies call an army group the Russians call a front. The Germans captured over 300,000 prisoners and 3,300 tanks. Stalin had several senior officers of the Western Front, including its commander, arrested and executed.

On June 29, Hitler ordered the panzer units of Army Group Center to halt their advance until the infantry behind them could complete the capture of the trapped Soviet units. Once again, as he had in France, Heinz Guderian disregarded his orders and continued to drive his panzers forward, under the polite fiction that this was a "reconnaissance in force." By early July, Army Group Center was closing in on the city of Smolensk, halfway to Moscow, though heavy rains at last forced a pause in their advance.

Army Group South had the most difficult assignment, because Joseph Stalin, disregarding the advice of his senior military commanders, had posted the Red Army's strongest units here, expecting a thrust into Ukraine. This is less crazy than it sounds. We know Stalin read *Mein Kampf*, so he may have picked up on Hitler's ideas about seizing the industry and the rich farmland of Ukraine for Germany. Hitler had told his commanders that the priority objectives for Barbarossa were, first Leningrad, second Ukraine, third Moscow. German Army commanders felt Moscow was the most important objective, but Hitler was Hitler, so they went along.

The southern portion of the front included a long stretch covered by the Romanian Army, which attempted to advance into Bessarabia, but didn't get very far. Farther north were the Carpathian Mountains and the Pripjat marshes, formidable geography. The Red Army had armored formations here, which attempted to counterattack the advancing Germans at the end of June. The Soviet armor was mostly destroyed, and by early July the Red Army was falling back to a new defensive line before the city of Kiev.

On June 23, the day after the invasion, Stalin created a supreme command to direct the war effort, and he gave it the old Imperial name: Stavka. The first orders to front line units were to counterattack the Germans wherever and whenever possible. At the front, commanders passed these orders on to their subordinates. They were fully aware of how unrealistic they were, but no one dared contradict instructions from Stalin himself.

The German offensive had so thoroughly disrupted and disorganized the Red Army units on the front lines that back in Moscow, Stalin and his commanders were not getting a clear picture of how bad the situation was. As those first days passed, the enormity of the unfolding disaster gradually became apparent. On the fifth day of the invasion, word came that German panzers had surrounded the city of Minsk, meaning the Wehrmacht had already blown through eastern Poland and was now in pre-war Soviet territory. Stalin got into a shouting match with Semyon Timoshenko and Georgy Zhukov, his top commanders, telling them "Lenin founded our state, and we've fucked it up."

Something in Stalin snapped. He fled Moscow and holed up at his dacha in the country, leaving the rest of the USSR's top government and military leaders scratching their heads and wondering what they were supposed to do. There was talk of foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov taking over in Stalin's absence, but neither Molotov nor anyone else dared take Stalin's seat at the head of the table. On June 30, they created the State Committee for Defense to centralize the government's war effort, after which a delegation from this new Committee drove out to the dacha. Stalin thought they had come to arrest him. Instead, they asked him politely to return to Moscow to chair their new committee.

In Ukraine, Communist Party chief Nikita Khrushchev directed the removal of machinery from hundreds of factories in the Donbas industrial region of eastern Ukraine, the machines to be shipped to new factories to be set up in the Urals. Across the Soviet Union, other officials were

doing the same. Over two thousand factories were dismantled. Because a factory isn't really a big brick building; it's the workers and machinery inside that count.

In Moscow, a secret special train was loaded with the Soviet gold reserve, the Romanov treasures that were now state property, and the corpse of Lenin, removed from its mausoleum and accompanied by a team of experts in its preservation. This train, protected by guards from the NKVD, left Moscow for the long trip to Siberia.

Of the not quite three million Red Army soldiers on the front, more than a million were killed, wounded, or taken prisoner in the first ten days of the invasion. The German side now had a numerical advantage approaching 2:1, and were advancing everywhere up and down the line. On July 2, German Army Chief of Staff Franz Halder wrote in his diary that the Russian campaign had been won in the space of two weeks.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Vasileios for his kind donation, and thank you to Peter for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Vasileios and Peter help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com) and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we continue the story of Operation Barbarossa. For the first three weeks, the Wehrmacht seemed on the path to another astonishing victory. Then came the Battle of Smolensk, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. In 1988, a Russian historian using the pen name Viktor Suvorov published a book in which he argued that Stalin and the Red Army were in fact preparing to invade German territory in 1941 and thus the Germans were being truthful in describing their own invasion as a preemptive strike.

There are a lot of problems with this argument. First of all, we know that Hitler had been planning to attack the USSR since 1933, so his invasion could hardly be described as a response to Soviet provocation.

There is clear evidence Stalin was working hard to maintain peaceful relations with Germany. It is true that Stalin was building up his military at the same time; this appears to have been spurred by the Fall of France and the buildup had not yet been completed by June 1941. In a meeting with senior military commanders in December 1940, Stalin told them that Hitler had written in *Mein Kampf* that the Soviet Union would not be ready for war until 1944, and instructed them that they needed to be ready in two years; that is by the end of 1942.

Did Stalin mean he wanted to be ready to attack Germany in 1943? That may well be, but it doesn't change the fact that an attack on Germany in 1941 would have been suicidal. The evidence suggests Stalin fully understood this.

[music: Closing War Theme]