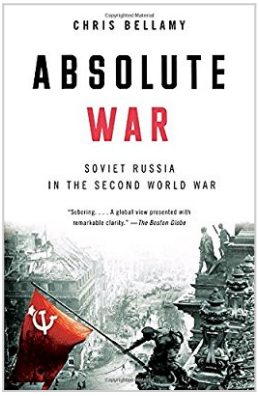

Absolute War: Soviet Russia in the Second World War

By Chris Bellamy

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In *Absolute War*, acclaimed historian and journalist Chris Bellamy crafts the first full account since the fall of the Soviet Union of World War II's battle on the Eastern Front, one of the deadliest conflicts in history.

The conflict on the Eastern Front, fought between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany between 1941 and 1945, was the greatest, most costly, and most brutal conflict on land in human history. It was arguably the single most decisive factor of the war, and shaped the postwar world as we know it. In this magisterial work, Bellamy outlines the lead-up to the war, in which the fragile alliance between the two dictators was unceremoniously broken, and examines its far-reaching consequences, arguing that the cost of victory was ultimately too much for the Soviet Union to bear. With breadth of scope and a surfeit of new information, this is the definitive history of a conflict whose reverberations are still felt today.

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Editorial Review

Review
“Sobering. . . . A global view presented with remarkable clarity.”
—*The Boston Globe*

“Probably the best account of the Eastern Front we shall see until President Putin relaxes his newly imposed restrictions on foreign access to the files. . . . Bellamy has made a tremendous contribution to the record of Russia's struggle, for which future historians will owe a debt.”
—*The Sunday Times* (London)

“Bellamy's treatment is authoritative, his judgments thorough and exacting, and his prose robust.”
—The *Daily Telegraph* (London)

About the Author

Chris Bellamy is Professor of Military Science and Doctrine and Director of the Security Studies Institute at Cranfield University. Born in 1955, he was educated at the universities of Oxford, London, Westminster, and Edinburgh, where he earned his doctorate. In 1990 he was appointed Defense Correspondent of the *Independent*, and served in that capacity for more than seven years, reporting from Saudi Arabia and Iraq during the 1991 Gulf War; from Bosnia between 1992 and 1997; and from Chechnya in 1995.

Chapter 1

1
FLIGHT OF THE RABID WOLF: THE LONG-TERM IMPACT OF THE WAR IN THE EAST

By the late 1960s a new wave of the rabies virus had sped westward through Europe's wild mammal population and reached the English Channel. Rabies is endemic in many parts of the world. A bite with infected saliva transmits the virus – which can kill horribly – to domestic animals, or to humans. The United Kingdom authorities feared the disease might leap the natural defensive barrier of the Channel and reappear in the UK, which had long been rabies-free because of strict quarantine regulations. Scientists agreed that the virus, transmitted in the wild mainly by wolves and foxes, had been spreading westwards through Europe since the end of the Second World War in 1945. In 1967, there were 2,775 reported cases in West Germany, and the first 199 cases in Switzerland. In 1968 it reached France, with 60 cases reported.1 It was clear that the epizootic – the animal equivalent of a human epidemic – had headed remorselessly westward, rather than east, north or south, since the war. Why?

It started when rabies-crazed wolves and foxes had fled the fighting on the Second World War's eastern front, as the Germans were pushed westward by the advancing Red Army from 1943 to 1945.2 The 'Iron Curtain' between East and West established after the war is known to have been an effective barrier to animals, as well as to people.3 The maddened creatures carrying rabies had clearly moved west before the Iron Curtain descended at the end of the war, and, understandably, kept going. And now, a quarter of a century later, the environmental effects of that war were lapping at the Channel and threatening the UK.

If the fighting on the eastern front had that effect on mad wolves and foxes, and on the natural environment, what effect must it have had on the millions of people from the sophisticated, educated and civilized nations of central and eastern Europe? A war 'hideous beyond imagining', not only unprecedented in its scale and violence, but 'befouled by and drenched in criminality'?4

In the late 1960s, the rabies scare was not the greatest concern for western European and UK security, however. The biggest threat - and it was very real then - was that of global thermonuclear war. Whoever might have started such a conflict, the missiles falling on western Europe, the UK and the US would probably have come from the Soviet Union. And the Soviet Union had become a world nuclear-missile-armed power as a direct result of the war in the East.

This book is the story of that war. The greatest, most costly and most brutal war on land in human history. It was fought between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany for 1,418 days, from 22 June 1941 to 9 May 1945, on a front from the Arctic Circle to the Caucasus, from the Barents Sea to the Black Sea, up to 3,200 kilometres long. Three months to the day after it ended, as promised, on 8-9 August 1945, the Soviet Union attacked a million-strong Japanese army in Manchuria and made it surrender in eight days, although fighting continued in Manchuria and the Kurile islands until 1 September.5

Soviet casualties in that 1941-5 period are now estimated at 27 million direct deaths, military and civilian. That is nearly half the total losses resulting from the Second World War. But the 'global loss' to the Soviet population – the difference between the population after the war and the population as it should have been, had the war not taken place, may be 48 to 49 million. Germany probably lost 4.3 million military dead as a direct result of the battles in the East.6 And these gures do not include the invisible legacy of wars, which we are only now coming to recognize: the psychological casualties, and the victims afflicted by nervous disorders and post-traumatic stress, and the consolations those people seek.

Another gruesome by-product of the war in the East was an intensification of Nazi persecution of the Jews and the 'final solution', which only reached its final, obscene dimensions after 1941. The Holocaust had begun before this – alert British newspapers were reporting deportation of German Jews in the 1930s, although many Jews were able to emigrate. However, the German Barbarossa offensive through central and eastern Europe brought millions more Jews under German control. Hitler had identified the Bolsheviks, who ruled the Soviet Union, with the Jews, even though the Soviet government's attitude to its own Jewish population showed it to be unashamedly anti-Semitic. But now Hitler's delusions were compounded by a perverted and superstitious logic. With so many Aryans being killed on the eastern front, extermination of the Jews and other 'undesirables' had to be stepped up to balance the books. The Red Army and the NKVD were not squeamish, but when they liberated Auschwitz in January 1945, even they were flabbergasted.7

From 1944 the Soviet Union called its victorious war against Nazi Germany from 1941 to 1945 the 'Great Patriotic War', an exponentially greater sequel to the 'Patriotic War' of 1812 against Napoleon (although the latter term was used until then). Many comparisons have been and can be made between the two wars, with Russia, itself autocratic and authoritarian, fighting two of the most flamboyant dictators in history - Napoleon, then Hitler. However repressive the indigenous regime, whether under the Tsar or the red star, the majority of the people (though far from all) rallied to it, preferring home-grown despotism to anything imposed from abroad. (There is a lesson here for those who like exporting their idea of democracy today.) Both conflicts saw 'war to the knife', as well as the biggest conventional battles of the age. The Russians scorched the earth as they withdrew, buying victory at terrible cost. And then came revenge, culminating in occupation of the enemy capital. After the defeat of Nazi Germany, at the Potsdam conference in July 1945, Averill Harriman, the US Ambassador to Moscow, congratulated Josef Stalin on the achievement of his forces in reaching the Nazi capital, Berlin. 'Alexander I got to Paris,' replied Stalin, laconically - a reference

to the occupation of Paris by Russian troops in 1815.8

Napoleon's ill-advised invasion of Russia in 1812 was only one of a number of campaigns which sealed his fate in a coalition world war. The Soviet Union's role in the Second World War, likewise, was only one part of the complex jigsaw of victory.

The Second World War was not a single conflict, but formed from a number of quite separate wars which fused as the world's leading military and economic powers were drawn in. The first war, which began with Germany's invasion of Poland (with Soviet approval) on 1 September 1939, was an old-fashioned 'cabinet war' for the European balance of power. The second war involved Germany's ally, Italy, and was about Italian attempts to establish dominion in the Mediterranean and north Africa. The 1939-40 Soviet-Finnish war and the occupation of the Baltic States and Bessarabia in 1940 were also relatively conventional affairs, their purpose being to secure Leningrad, the Soviet Union's second city, and other parts of the Soviet Union's western frontier. The Soviet Union's tightening grip on eastern Europe precipitated the third major war, the greatest and bloodiest, and the subject of this book. Hitler needed the natural resources, manpower and living space of the Soviet Union to secure Germany's position as a world power. But Nazism had also grown as a response to the perceived threat from communism, and that conflict, too, was played out in this vast theatre. It was the collision of two dictatorships in a land that had spread in a vast plain across half the world, which the geopoliticians believed to be the Eurasian 'heartland'. The fourth great war, between Japan and the other imperial powers, had its origins in Japan's invasion of China in 1937, but became part of the world war on 7 December 1941.9 Reluctant though the isolationist United States had been to become engaged in the entangling alliances, within four years it emerged from the war as one of two world military, scientific and economic 'superpowers'. The other one was the Soviet Union.

Without British and US dominance at sea, the strategic air campaign and the war in the Pacific, it is very possible that the Soviet Union would have been defeated in 1942 or that, at the very least, the war in the East would have gone on much longer.10 Nevertheless, during the critical period of late 1941 and all of 1942, American power was only starting to be engaged and the Allied strategic bombing offensive against Germany was just beginning to get under way, as the latter's greatest exponent, Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur 'Bomber' Harris, confirmed.11 Of all the interwoven strands, the war on the eastern front was probably the crucial military, economic and political struggle of the Second World War. It certainly was between mid 1941 and mid-to-late 1943, as the war's outcome hung in the balance.12 After that, the western Allies were ashore in mainland Europe following the invasion of Sicily, which coincided with the last major German offensive in the East at Kursk, and the Japanese were being pushed back in the Pacific. The failure of Barbarossa, which became apparent during 1942, created the conditions for the initiative to pass to the Allies at the end of 1942.13 For that reason, this book pays particular attention to that period and especially to 1942.

It was not for nothing that, as early as January 1943, with uncanny prescience, the American Time magazine named Josef Stalin as its 'man of the year' for 1942 (see Plate 4).14 With hindsight, the Soviet dictator seems a bizarre choice for Americans to have made. But it underlines the scale of the Soviet achievement in that precarious year.

Winston Churchill, the British war leader, who hated communism and was no lover of the Russians, similarly acknowledged their pivotal role in the war. In a speech to the UK Parliament in 1944 his analysis was razor sharp:

The advance of their Armies from Stalingrad to the Dniester river, with vanguards reaching out towards the Pruth, a distance of 900 miles [1,440 km], accomplished in a single year, constitutes the greatest cause of

Hitler's undoing. Since I spoke to you last not only have the Hun invaders been driven from the lands they had ravaged, but the guts of the German army have been largely torn out by Russian valour and generalship. The people of all the Russias have been fortunate in finding in their supreme ordeal of agony a warrior leader, Marshal Stalin, whose authority enabled him to combine and control the movements of armies numbered by many millions upon a front of nearly 2,000 miles.

In one sentence of his address Churchill had encapsulated the scale and significance of the Soviet effort, and in one word, 'generalship', the Soviet mastery of the higher conduct of war, at the operational and strategic levels. In the second sentence he alluded to the unwholesome but undeniable fact that only the authority wielded by the Soviet dictator and his security apparatus could coordinate a war effort on this scale in such a country.

But not only was the Great Patriotic War (with the Manchurian campaign as its ultimate postscript) the greatest land conflict, with a significant air component, in the history of the world-aconflict which sealed the destruction of Nazi Germany. It also fixed the course of the next half-century of world history - the bipolar world order which dominated international relations until the 1990s. In 1942, the British government had been planning for action 'in the event of a Russian collapse'.16 By April 1944 the Foreign Office assessed, rightly, that the Soviet Union would emerge from the war 'as the strongest land power in the world and one of the three strongest air powers'. But, even more importantly, it would be 'the very successful exponent of a new economic and political system and a new type of multi-national state'. Finally, it would be the great Slav power, as in the past, and the heir to much of the greatness and heritage of the old Russia. 'She will have very great prestige and very great pride in herself.'17 The war therefore stamped greatness on the Soviet Union. Its legacy is still imprinted on the United Nations, on other international cooperative security arrangements such as Nato, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and other alliances, treaties, disarmament processes and ways of doing business. Russia's position as one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, and its great military and diplomatic power status in the world today, though diminished compared with that of the Soviet Union, is undeniably a result of its victory in the Great Patriotic War. Before that, it was very much a pariah in the international community, viewed rather like a 'rogue state' today.

The war therefore defined the Soviet Union, and modern Russia. Although the USSR had been conceived in the November 1917 Bolshevik revolution, it did not fully coalesce until 1924. As a fully united political entity, it was therefore only seventeen years old when the Great Patriotic War started. Even more than the forced industrialization and collectivization of the 1920s and 1930s, the great purge from 1937, the cold war and the space race, that most terrible of wars was the defining four years of Russian and Soviet history. Like the American Civil War, which fused the USA from a collection of individual states into a single nation, the Great Patriotic War made the Soviet Union a space-bound superpower.

However, the effort expended during those four years and the succeeding struggle against the West - which followed without any respite - ultimately broke the Soviet Union. It was an environmental and demographic catastrophe. Modern Russia, the successor state, one of fifteen nations created by the break-up of the USSR at the end of 1991, was a long-term casualty of the Great Patriotic War. Most of the significant battles of the Great Patriotic War, apart from Moscow, Stalingrad, Kursk and the siege of Leningrad, took place outside Russia - in Ukraine, in Belarus, and in countries that are now part of Nato - in the Baltic States, in Poland, in reunited Germany. The war was fought out of Russia, but much of it on non-Russian territory. Ultimately, that may have helped fuse Russian identity, at the expense of Soviet identity and unity, leading to the break-up of what is now called former Soviet space.18

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