# HIS 242

# Unit 10: World War II

# Remarks by Professor Blois

<u>The non-aggression pact</u> Two factors dominated Soviet foreign policy: Marxism-Leninism and national interest. In the 1920s and 1930s, each was represented by a major institution of the Soviet state, respectively, the Communist International (Comintern) and the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs. Throughout the thirties, the influence of the Comintern waned and the Soviet Union moved steadily away from prioritizing world revolution in favor of the policy of "socialism in one country." By the time the Molotov-Ribbentrop non-aggression pact between Germany and the USSR was signed in August 1939, the Comintern was a dead duck.

Prior to the pact, the USSR through its foreign minister Maxim Litvinov and its membership in the League of Nations was a leading proponent of "collective security" as the principal means of confronting and containing Nazi Germany. However, a series of events, principally those around and after the September 1938 Munich agreement (the Soviet Union was neither consulted nor invited to the conference that produced this capitulation to Hitler's demands vis-a-vis Czechoslovakia), led to a complete Soviet about face a year later. In the final accounting, the important fact to Stalin must

have been that he could clearly perceive Hitler's intentions, while those of the Western powers had become more and more inscrutable.

The Nazi-Soviet pact signed just before the Germans' September 1, 1939 invasion of Poland would become a central point in theories stressing the homogeneity of totalitarian dictatorships. According to such arguments there was much more in common between Hitler's Germany and Stalinist Russia than either leader would have readily admitted. Besides its non-aggression provisions, there was a secret accord within the agreement whereby the Soviet Union would join--within two weeks of the German invasion--in the partition of Poland. It seems likely Stalin was not disillusioned about the likelihood of an eventual German invasion of Russia, but was totally wrong about how soon it might come.

<u>The Great Fatherland War</u> The two big questions about the war in Russia are: one, why did Hitler attack in the first place; and two, why given so many clear warnings, did Stalin fail to recognize the threat as imminent? Basically, Hitler felt that he could risk attacking Russia because the western front was stabilized and quiet. Moreover, he perceived that the Allies were probably unwilling to aid Russia meaningfully. Stalin's behavior is less understandable. Apparently, he simply refused to believe the attack would come so soon. And when it did come, Stalin hesitated, feeling that Hitler might simply be trying to provoke Russia into launching a war for which she was still unready.

Russian losses from the war were tremendous. It is estimated that more than 25 million Soviet citizens perished, split more or less evenly between military and civilian deaths. But it was the heroic resistance of the population that produced victory against Germany. After the 1942-43 Stalingrad campaign, the outcome could be foretold. And it was hastened by the June 1944 opening of a second front in France by the Allies.

Economic recovery Soviet economic losses were no less staggering than the human ones. The destruction of 100,000 collective farms; 30,000 factories; and over 1700 towns is almost incomprehensible. These are estimated have amounted to half of all wartime property losses in Europe.

In a sense, however, the stresses of the war were not without benefits. A policy of locating industries in the Urals and western Siberia that had begun before the war was drastically accelerated during it, and new sources of raw materials were simultaneously developed. The post-war Fourth Five Year Plan sought to reconstruct the economy of European Russia. The plan, like its predecessors, was biased in favor of heavy industry and the state's needs and goals, rather than those of the citizenry. Indeed, this was probably the last economic plan whose imbalance against consumers could be justified by the government. The resulting reconstruction, coupled with the new industrial bases in Siberia, made Russia much stronger economically than before.

A few personal anecdotes In 2010, I was privileged to represent the U.S. as a Fulbright scholar-administrator in two Russian cities, Moscow and Ivanovo. Ivanovo was about a three hour drive (that's how I got there from Moscow: a car was sent for me). In Moscow, I mainly took part in conferences and got to visit with old friends. In Ivanovo, I was assigned to a particular university, which turned out to be a major provider of trained engineers, including nuclear. This was during the brief "re-set" era of President Obama's first term and, as I had sometimes been viewed during earlier trips to Viet Nam and India, I think I was seen at least part of the time as Uncle Sam in the flesh. I was interviewed for the newspaper and for some TV shows, and tried to speak effusively about what was then termed the Obama-Medvedev Initiative, which was designed to usher a new era of cultural and educational exchanges and cooperation. More about this in a later unit; for now, just a few words with some relevance to the whole World War II experience.

One of my first evenings, I went to dinner with the rector of the university and one of his chief deputies, probably a dean, if I recall. This was also my academic title at the time (dean, that is). During zakuski appetizers (wonderful smoked fish and pickled vegetables), and more than a few rounds of vodka toasts, we discussed the era of World War II cooperation between our nations. It was actually very likely the toasts that

got us started on this, since the greatest era of common ground between our two countries was the grand alliance against Hitler.

I lost an uncle, killed almost a year before my birth, in the Pacific theater, so pretty sure that came up at some point, but mostly we discussed the Russian, eastern front in Europe. One of my companions mentioned that his father had gone to the front in 1943, and added that had he gone earlier he probably would not have returned. I will never forget him adding, "No one who went to the front in 1941 returned." He went on to tell the story of a relative, might even have been is father--that part I do not recall, who was wounded and while in hospital was visited by his wife. Several months of frontline duty had aged him so much that, before bringing his wife to his bedside, one of his doctors told him "Your daughter is here."

My grad school advisor and prof, Will Brooks, was a very early participant in the US-USSR exchange of young scholars in the mid-1960s. His research field was the period in the reign of Alexander II known as the era of great reforms (abolition of serfdom being the most significant of these). His Russian mentor was the very famous historian P. A. Zaionchkovskii. Zaionchkovskii was old enough to have been in school at the time of the 1917 revolution. His family was middle class (his father was a doctor in the tsarist army), so through his early adulthood he was denied access to higher education as some kind of enemy of the working class. Eventually he was able to attend university as a night student and also

enlisted in the Red Army in time to be among those defending Stalingrad in 1942-43. During the winter of this campaign, the temperature had sunk to minus forty, and Zaionchkovskii found himself without gloves. For the rest of his life, he told Will Brooks, he refused to put on gloves unless the temperature went lower than minus forty. This was his small way of recalling and honoring his comrades.

There is nothing exceptional or remarkable about these few anecdotes, they just happen to be my own and, as such, are keepsakes. Unlike the Soviet long, costly ground campaigns against the Germans, the U.S. waged a different kind of war. It was fought on two fronts, Europe and the Pacific, but in many ways was undertaken similarly on both fronts: amphibious assault followed by grueling combat. In the Pacific, this meant what was called island-hopping while in Europe it was characterized by one immense amphibious landing in France, D-Day. In either theater of operations, here is one more anecdote that was equally true. A good friend of mine was a long-time U.S. Park Service historian, serving under the then chief historian, Dr. Ed Bearss. Bearss was a Marine who was gravely wounded in the New Guinea campaign, on the island of New Britain. He related many experiences to my friend, including that the type of Japanese machine gun which struck him was a slow-firing model. Had he been hit by their faster firing type, he said he would have been cut in half and killed instantly. He also used to say, about the many Marine landings on Pacific islands, "the

first wave doesn't march in parades."  This remark, I've come to feel, is the American equivalent of my Russian friend commenting that no one sent to the front in 1941 returned.

# World War II photo essay

[unless noted otherwise, all photos by B Blois, April 2010]

This is the main Russian monument on the field of Borodino, where in early September 1812 Napoleon was stopped cold on his advance toward Moscow, approximately seventy miles further east.  He did soon thereafter briefly occupy the city, the Russian commander Kutuzov having decided it was more prudent to save his army than the city.

In mid October 1941, as Hitler's armies approached Moscow, the same ground was again fought over.  This Russian pillbox sits less than 100 meters from the monument.  The 1941engagement, instead of a clash of whole armies, was one of many along a more than 1000 mile front, resulting as did almost all such during summer and

fall in the Russians being forced to retreat, but they repositioned closer to Moscow, which the Germans never occupied.  In December, having gotten within a few dozen miles of the city, they were pushed back about 150 miles during the Russian counter-offensive launched by Zhukov's reserve armies brought to the task from Siberia. Never knew about the "second battle of Borodino" until touring the field in April 2010.  Very poignant spot for all Russians and for anyone who has read the Borodino chapters of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*.  A major Tolstoy museum is adjacent to the battlefield.

Now that the anniversaries of the Russian Revolution are no longer marked by celebrations and military parades, the annual May 9 parade marking the defeat of Nazi Germany is the most solemn and revered holiday in Russia. The Russian tomb of the unknown soldier, marked by a monument and a guarded eternal flame, sits just outside the Kremlin.  Past it, the parade of military hardware streams toward and then across Red Square.  Very close by are the statue honoring Marshal Zhukov (next photo) and the Revolution Square McDonalds.  Wedding parties, during Soviet times, would often place flowers at the flame in respectful tribute, and on every visit I make it a point to pay my own respects.

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Marshal Georgi Zhukov's equestrian statue was erected just north of Red Square in 1995, the fiftieth anniversary year of the Soviet defeat of Hitler and Nazi Germany. Zhukov was commander-in-chief at the time of the June 1941 German invasion, but ran afoul of Stalin and was demoted shortly before the invasion. Still in command of major army groups, he inflicted the first defeat on the advancing Germans near Smolensk in August. He then was sent to Leningrad to organize its defense but was recalled to direct the December counter-offensive that saved Moscow. He would later lead the defense of Stalingrad, after which his armies began offensive operations that led to German defeats at Kursk and elsewhere and thereafter to the relentless Russian advance to Berlin. A still good read on all of this is *Marshal Zhukov's Greatest Battles*, published in the U.S. in 1969 after the memoirs had been serialized in Soviet military journals in the mid-1960s.

His last heroic act was to personally arrest the dreaded secret police chief Lavrenty Beria shortly after Stalin's death in early March 1953. All the politburo hierarchy wanted to remove Beria but none had the guts to actually order his arrest, so they arranged for Zhukov to burst into their meeting and do the deed. Shortly thereafter, Beria was executed and the so-called Thaw began.

Here is the Museum of the Great Patriotic War (MGPW), opened on the highest spot in or around Moscow, the Poklonnaya Hills. I first saw it from a distance of about two miles during an annual ice festival held nearby, in late December 1993, when it was still a construction site. I guess this band was about to perform, perhaps for the always present groups of school children (see below). The museum is chock full of all sorts of militaria, as well quite a few mural dioramas of the major engagements leading to Soviet victory and expulsion of the Nazis.

One of the mural dioramas in the museum depicts a turning point in the Battle of Moscow and, for that matter according to many authorities, of the entire war. In late November 1941, the German army was attempting to encircle Moscow and in the north reached the Moscow Canal (which links the Moscow and Volga rivers).

The Germans crossed the canal on November 27, and for a few more days continued their drive toward Moscow; the lock itself is 40 miles distant but the Germans probably got within 12 miles (Guderian in the west reported seeing the Kremiln spires and Hoth in the north reported seeing anti-aircraft guns flashing above the city). Marshal Georgi Zhukov had recently been in charge of defending Leningrad, itself under grave threat, but Stalin recalled him to direct the even more critical Moscow campaign. In the first days of December, the Red Army launched a counter-offensive. New infantry units and aircraft squadrons from Siberia had been positioned east of Moscow, and hundreds of new T-34 tanks were concentrated there as well. During December 1941, they blunted the German advance and pushed them back from the city.

In this diorama, Soviet infantry are approaching Lock 3 of the canal, due north of Moscow (identifiable by the two Petrine era frigates atop the lock gates). The Germans have already been pushed back across it, leaving behind, for instance, this Panzer III tank. Notice the tank traps (which the Russians called 'hedgehogs'). The German tank appears undamaged, so it likely had frozen in the -40 temperature. This is the point at which Celsius and Fahrenheit temperatures meet, so -40 is roughly the same on both scales, and engine oil freezes around -20 F. Not sure why the Soviet tanks, such as this T-34, did not freeze but imagine it has to do with their having better supplies of diesel fuel to keep them running or being kept indoors when temps were coldest. I imagine the Red Army was better off in both these regards than the Germans.

Notice how well-equipped are the Soviet infantrymen: long wool coats, also dyed white for winter camo; also good fur (probably rabbit or squirrel) ushanka caps with ear flaps, and heavy felt boots. At the end of the infantry column are three two-man anti-tank teams armed with what are probably PTRD-41 14.5mm rifles. The T-34 tank

accompanying them was probably brand new, unlike a lot of worn-out German armor at the time.  Attacking the retreating Germans are two Soviet fighter bombers, probably Tupolev PE-2s.  Like the T-34, these were armaments unexpected by the Germans insofar as they had previously not been in service and also were superior to their German counterparts, whether Panzers or Stukas.  By January 1942, the Germans had been pushed back more than 150 miles from Moscow and never again got so close.

A group of school children contemplating the same diorama.  I had to wait quite a while for the unobstructed view of the previous photo.

Before and after images--with and mostly without kids--of the museum's Siege of Leningrad diorama. The domed building is St. Isaacs Cathedral. Just beyond it is another very iconic structure, the Admiralty (its spire is absent, having been tumbled during a bombing of the city. The planes overhead are German bombers. Between the lady's head and burning building in the photo at right is visible the Peter and Paul Fortress. Its construction was ordered by Peter the Great and went on for another fifteen years after his death. It sits on the city's original citadel. Its church contains the mausoleum of most Romanov tsars and tsarinas and an adjacent building was used as a prison from Peter's time until after the Bolshevik revolution. In its day, it gave lodging to--among others--Dostoevsky and Lenin's older brother Alexander.

Those were the days.  Soviet and American troops arm in arm somewhere near where the two armies met on the Elbe, shortly before the surrender of Nazi Germany.  This photo was probably taken in the small German town of Torgau on or around 25 April 1945, "Elbe Day" in the parlance of the times.  In 1995, Russia issued a three ruble commemorative coin marking the event.

Everybody loves an underdog, and man versus dragon always qualifies:  Beowulf had his and so did St. George, who was frequently invoked as a patron-protector of Russia since the time of Yaroslav the Wise (1050s).  This heroic sculture and adjacent obelisk near the entrance to the MGPW was designed by Zurab Tsereteli, still living as I write this in May 2022.

Tsereteli is famous around the world both for monuments in place at the UN and in his native Georgia (two more St. Georges), elsewhere in Moscow (celebrating Peter the Great as founder of the Russian Navy), and for some rejected by the cities for which they were proposed (a 911 memorial offered to New York that wound up in New Jersey, and a gigantic Columbus refused by New York, Boston, and Ft. Lauderdale that wound up in Puerto Rico). Okay, now we're way off the point, but who better to symbolize Russia's defeat of the Nazis.

The tsars' summer palace was located fifteen miles south of St. Petersburg.  It began life as an humble residence built for Peter the Great's second wife, who after his death ruled very briefly as Catherine I.  Several decades later, it was enlarged and re-designed (by the architect Francesco Rastrelli, who also designed the Winter Palace) to rival Versailles.  One of its hallmarks was the Amber Room, a gift to Peter from the king of Prussia.  It contained several tons of amber, covering more than 600 square feet.  The palace was occupied by the Nazis during the siege of Leningrad.  When retreating in 1944, they ripped up and carried away the palace's parquet floors along with other trophy items from the palace, including all of the amber.  Over several post-war decades the amber trove was sought in vain.  Finally, the cultural looting and vandalism was put right when--largely thanks to donations by German corporations--the restored room re-opened in 2003.

These larger than life-size tank trap monuments are located on the highway linking Sheremetevo Airport with Moscow.  They sit at a distance of approximately twelve miles northwest of the city center and represent the closest approach by the Wehrmacht in November/December 1941 at this particular point in their attempted encirclement.  On my first trip to the Soviet Union, I asked about them while being driven to my Moscow hotel, the gigantic Rossiia, adjacent to Red Square and at the time the world's largest hotel; it has since been demolished.  This memorial is well within Moscow's sprawl and very close to the third circumferential ring road.  Seeing it for the first time was a shock, thinking in very real terms about how close the Germans got.  A bit like if, while traveling the Dulles Access Road from the airport toward Washington, you came upon such a thing in the vicinity of Tysons Corner.
[photo AP/Alexander Zemlianichenko]

In several fatal ways, the Germans underestimated the task in front of them when invading the Soviet Union. One not always apparent to Americans is that Soviet weaponry was often superior. The T-34 tank is the most famous example of this. It had only recently entered service with the Red Army, but quickly became a subject of concern for the invaders, whose anti-tank rifles proved more or less useless against its sloped and relatively heavy armor. T-34s would prove decisive in driving the Germans back from Moscow and in many other engagements including the huge tank battle of Kursk. In addition to the T-34, two other weapons should be mentioned as of great importance to the Soviet forces: the PPSh-41 assault submachine gun with 71-round drum and the Ilyushin Il-2 Shturmovik fighter-bomber. All three could be called force multipliers. T-34s sit atop many monuments in Russia. This one was along the Mozhaisk highway, one of the routes traveled by both Napoleon's and Hitler's armies.