For many years I maintained far too many magazine subscriptions, more periodicals than I could possibly read or even skim, so most weeks they went straight into storage, with scarcely more than a glance at the cover. But every now and then, I might casually browse one of them, curious about what I had usually been missing.

Thus, in the summer of 2010, I happened to leaf through an issue of Chronicles, the small-circulation flagship organ of the marginalized paleoconservative movement, and soon began reading a blandly-titled book review[1]. But the piece so astonished me that it immediately justified all the many years of subscription payments I had sent to that magazine.

The reviewer was Andrei Navrozov, a Soviet emigre long resident in Britain, and he opened by quoting a passage from a previous 1990 book review, published almost exactly twenty years before:

[Suvorov] is arguing with every book, every article, every film, every NATO directive, every Downing Street assumption, every Pentagon clerk, every academic, every Communist and anti-Communist, every neoconservative intellectual, every Soviet song, poem, novel and piece of music ever heard, written, made, sung, issued, produced, or born during the last 50 years. For this reason, Icebreaker is the most original work of history it has been my privilege to read.
He himself had written that earlier book review, which ran in the prestigious *Times Literary Supplement* following the original English publication of *Icebreaker*, and his description was not overblown. The work sought to overturn the settled history of World War II.

*Icebreaker*’s author, writing under the pen-name Viktor Suvorov, was a veteran Soviet military intelligence officer who had defected to the West in 1978 and subsequently published a number of well-regarded books on the Soviet military and intelligence services. But here he advanced a far more radical thesis.

The “Suvorov Hypothesis” claimed that during the summer of 1941 Stalin was on the very verge of mounting a massive invasion and conquest of Europe, while Hitler’s sudden attack on June 22nd of that year was intended to forestall that looming blow. Moreover, the author also argued that Stalin’s planned attack constituted merely the final act in a much longer geopolitical strategy that he had been developing since at least the early 1930s.

Following the Bolshevik Revolution, the new Soviet regime had been viewed with extreme suspicion and hostility by other European countries, most of which also regarded their own domestic Communist Parties as likely fifth columns. So to fulfill Lenin’s dream and carry the revolution to Germany and the rest of Europe, Stalin somehow needed to split the Europeans, and break their common line of resistance. He allegedly viewed Hitler’s rise as exactly such a potential “icebreaker,” an opportunity to unleash another bloody European war and exhaust all sides, while the Soviet Union remained aloof and bided its strength, waiting for the right moment to sweep in and conquer the entire continent.

To this end, Stalin had directed his powerful German Communist Party to take political actions ensuring that Hitler came to power and then later lured the German dictator into signing the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact to divide Poland. This led Britain and France to declare war on Germany, while also eliminating the Polish buffer state, thereby placing Soviet armies directly on the German border. And from the very moment he signed that long-term peace agreement with Hitler, he abandoned all his defensive preparations, and instead embarked upon an enormous military build-up of the purely offensive forces he intended to use for European conquest. Thus according to Suvorov, Stalin ranks as “the chief culprit” behind the outbreak of World War II in Europe, and the updated English edition of his book bears that exact title.

To my great surprise I discovered that Suvorov’s remarkable theories had gained enormous worldwide prominence since 1990, and had been widely discussed almost everywhere except in America and the other English-speaking countries. As Navrozov explained:


Some months later, a German edition of the book, under the *title Der Eisbrecher: Hitler in Stalins Kaulkul*, was published in Germany by a smallish house, Klett-Cotta, to timid and gingerly reviews. It sold 8,000 copies. In 1992, Suvorov’s
manuscript was delivered to a maverick publisher in Moscow, and at last the book saw the light of day in the original Russian, quickly selling out its first print run of 100,000 copies. In the years that followed, over five million copies have been sold, making Suvorov the most-read military historian in history.

And yet, in the nearly 20 years that have elapsed between Icebreaker’s launch in England and the present publication of The Chief Culprit, no British, American, Canadian, or Australian publisher saw fit to exploit potentially global interest in the drifting Icebreaker—or to so much as touch Suvorov with a barge pole—despite the fact that the almost unobtainable $20 copies of the long-out-of print Hamish Hamilton edition have been changing hands on the internet for upward of $500.

Since 1990, Suvorov’s works have been translated into at least 18 languages and an international storm of scholarly controversy has swirled around the Suvorov Hypothesis in Russia, Germany, Israel, and elsewhere. Numerous other authors have published books in support or more often strong opposition, and even international academic conferences have been held to debate the theory. But our own English-language media has almost entirely blacklisted and ignored this ongoing international debate, to such an extent that the name of the most widely-read military historian who ever lived had remained totally unknown to me.

Finally in 2008, the prestigious Naval Academy Press of Annapolis decided to break this 18 year intellectual embargo and published an updated English edition of Suvorov’s work. But once again, our media outlets almost entirely averted their eyes, and only a single review appeared in an obscure ideological publication, where I chanced to encounter it. This conclusively demonstrates that throughout most of the twentieth century a united front of English-language publishers and media organs could easily maintain a boycott of any important topic, ensuring that almost no one in America or the rest of the Anglosphere would ever hear of it. Only with the recent rise of the Internet has this disheartening situation begun to change.

Determining Stalin’s true motives and the basis of his foreign policy during the 1930s is hardly easy, and his statements and actions are subject to multiple interpretations. Therefore, the theory that the dictator spent all those years deftly preparing the outbreak of World War II appears quite speculative to me. But the other central claim of the Suvorov Hypothesis—that the Soviets were themselves on the verge of attacking when the Germans struck—is an extremely factual question, which can be evaluated based on hard evidence. I find the case quite compelling, at least if the facts and details that Suvorov cites in support are not totally spurious, which seems unlikely with the Naval Academy Press as his publisher.

The Eastern Front was the decisive theater of World War II, involving military forces vastly larger than those deployed in the West or the Pacific, and the standard narrative always
emphasizes the ineptitude and weakness of the Soviets. On June 22, 1941, Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa, a sudden, massive surprise attack on the USSR, which caught the Red Army completely unaware. Stalin has been regularly ridiculed for his total lack of preparedness, with Hitler often described as the only man the paranoid dictator had ever fully trusted. Although the defending Soviet forces were enormous in size, they were poorly led, with their officer corps still not recovered from the crippling purges of the late 1930s, and their obsolete equipment and poor tactics were absolutely no match for the modern panzer divisions of Germany’s hitherto undefeated Wehrmacht. The Russians initially suffered gigantic losses, and only the onset of winter and the vast spaces of their territory saved them from a quick defeat. After this, the war seesawed back-and-forth for four more years, until superior numbers and improved tactics finally carried the Soviets to the streets of a destroyed Berlin in 1945.

Such is the traditional understanding of the titanic Russo-German struggle that we see endlessly echoed in every newspaper, book, television documentary, and film around us. But even a cursory examination of the initial situation has always revealed strange anomalies.

Many years ago, while in Junior High, I became an avid war-gamer with a strong interest in military history, and the Eastern Front of World War II was certainly a very popular topic. But every reconstruction of Operation Barbarossa always noted that the Germans owed much of their great initial success to the very odd deployment of the huge Soviet forces, which were all massed along the border in vulnerable formations almost as if preparing for an attack, and some writers casually suggested that this might have indeed been the case. But the sheer volume of supporting evidence amassed by Suvorov goes far beyond this sort of idle speculation, and he produces a historical picture radically different than what our standard accounts have always implied.

First, although there was been a widespread belief in the superiority of Germany’s military technology, its tanks and its planes, this is almost entirely mythological. In actual fact, Soviet tanks were far superior in main armament, armor, and maneuverability to their German counterparts, so much so that the overwhelming majority of panzers were almost obsolescent by comparison. And the Soviet superiority in numbers was even more extreme, with Stalin deploying several times more tanks than the combined total of those held by Germany and every other nation in the world: 27,000 against just 4,000 in Hitler’s forces. Even during peacetime, a single Soviet factory in Kharkov produced more tanks in every six month period than the entire Third Reich had built prior to 1940. The Soviets held a similar superiority, though somewhat less extreme, in their ground-attack bombers. The totally closed nature of the USSR meant that vast military forces remained entirely hidden from outside observers.

There is also little evidence that the quality of Soviet officers or military doctrine fell short. Indeed, we often forget that history’s first successful example of a “blitzkrieg” in modern warfare was the crushing August 1939 defeat that Stalin inflicted upon the Japanese 6th Army in Outer Mongolia, relying upon a massive surprise attack of tanks, bombers, and mobile infantry. And Stalin apparently thought so highly of many of his top military strategists in 1941, that despite his huge initial losses, many of them remained in command and were eventually promoted to the highest ranks of the Soviet military establishment by the end of the war.
Certainly, many aspects of the Soviet military machine were primitive, but exactly the same was true of their Nazi opponents. Perhaps the most surprising detail about the technology of the invading Wehrmacht in 1941 was that its transportation system was still almost entirely pre-modern, relying upon wagons and carts drawn by 750,000 horses to maintain the vital flow of ammunition and replacements to its advancing armies.

Meanwhile, major categories of Soviet weapons systems seem almost impossible to explain except as important elements of Stalin’s offensive plans. Although the bulk of the Soviet armored forces were medium tanks like the T-28 and T-34, generally far superior to their German counterparts, the USSR had also pioneered the development of several lines of highly specialized tanks, most of which had no counterpart elsewhere in the world.

(*) The Soviets had produced a remarkable line of light BT tanks, easily able to shed their tracks and continue on wheels, achieving a top speed of 60 miles per hour, two or three times faster than any other comparable armored vehicle, and ideally suited to exploitation drives deep into enemy territory. However, such wheeled operation was only effective on paved highways, of which Soviet territory had none, hence were ideally suited for travel on Germany’s large network of autobahns. In 1941 Stalin deployed almost 6,500 of these autobahn-oriented tanks, more than the rest of the world’s tanks combined.

(*) For centuries, Continental conquerors from Napoleon to Hitler had been stymied by the barrier of the English Channel, but Stalin was far better prepared. Although Stalin’s vast USSR was entirely a land-power, he pioneered the world’s only series of fully amphibious light tanks, able to successfully cross large rivers, lakes, and even that notoriously wide moat last successfully traversed by William the Conqueror in 1066. By 1941, the Soviets deployed 4,000 of these amphibious tanks, far more than 3,350 German tanks of all types used in the attack. But being useless in defense, they were all ordered abandoned or destroyed.

(*) The Soviets also fielded many thousands of heavy tanks, intended to engage and defeat enemy armor, while the Germans had none at all. In direct combat, a Soviet KV-1 or KV-2 could easily destroy four or five of the best German tanks, while remaining almost invulnerable to enemy shells. Suvorov recounts the example of a KV which took 43 direct hits before finally becoming incapacitated, surrounded by the hulks of the ten German tanks it had first managed to destroy.

Other evidence of the scale and intent of Stalin’s armies in the summer of 1941 are equally telling:

(*) During the early years of World War II, the Germans effectively utilized paratroops and airborne forces to seize key enemy targets far behind the front lines during a major offensive, and this was an important component of their victories against France in 1940 and Greece in 1941. Such units are necessarily lightly armed and no match for regular infantry in a defensive battle; hence their only role is an offensive one. Germany entered the war with 4,000 paratroops, a far larger force than anything found in Britain, France, America, Italy, or Japan. However, the Soviets had at least 1,000,000 trained paratroopers, and Suvorov believes that the true total was actually closer to 2,000,000.
(*) Sometimes the production decisions of major weapon systems provide strong hints of the broader strategy behind their development. The most widely produced military aircraft in history was the heavily armored IL-2, a powerful Soviet ground-attack bomber that was originally designed as a two-man system, with the rear gunner able to effectively defend the plane against enemy fighters during its missions. However, Stalin personally ordered the design changed to eliminate the second man and defensive armament, which left the bomber extremely vulnerable to enemy aircraft once the war broke out. Stalin and his war-planners had seemingly banked on possessing near-total air supremacy during the entire course of any conflict, an assumption plausible only if the German *luftwaffe* were destroyed on the ground by a surprise attack on the very first day.

(*) There is considerable evidence that in the weeks prior to the German surprise attack, Stalin had ordered the release of many hundreds of thousands of Gulag prisoners, who were issued basic weapons and organized into NKVD-led divisions and corps, constituting a substantial part of the Second Strategic Echelon located hundreds of miles from the German border. These units may have been intended to serve as occupation troops, allowing the much more powerful front-line forces to press onward and complete the conquests of France, Italy, the Balkans, and Spain. Otherwise, I can find no other plausible explanation for Stalin’s action.

(*) The planned invasion and occupation of a large country whose population speaks a different language requires considerable logistical preparation. As an example, prior to their attack the notoriously methodical Germans printed and distributed to their troops large numbers of German-Russian basic phrasebooks, allowing effective communication with the local Slavic villagers and townspeople. Ironically enough, at around the same time, the USSR seems to have produced very similar Russian-German phrasebooks, allowing conquering Soviet troops to easily make themselves understood to German civilians. Many millions of these phrasebooks had been distributed to Soviet forces on the German border during the early months of 1941.

Suvorov’s reconstruction of the weeks directly preceding the outbreak of combat is a fascinating one, emphasizing the mirror-image actions taken by both the Soviet and German armies. Each side moved its best striking units, airfields, and ammunition dumps close to the border, ideal for an attack but very vulnerable in defense. Each side carefully deactivated any residual minefields and ripped out any barbed wire obstacles, lest these hinder the forthcoming attack. Each side did its best to camouflage their preparations, talking loudly about peace while preparing for imminent war. The Soviet deployment had begun much earlier, but since their forces were so much larger and had far greater distances to cross, they were not yet quite ready for their attack when the Germans struck, and thereby shattered Stalin’s planned conquest of Europe.

All of the above examples of Soviet weapons systems or strategic decisions seem very difficult to explain under the conventional defensive narrative, but make perfect sense if Stalin’s orientation from 1939 onward had always been an offensive one, and he had decided that summer 1941 was the time to strike and enlarge his Soviet Union to include all the European states, just as Lenin had originally intended. And Suvorov provides many dozens of additional examples, building brick by brick a very compelling case for this theory.
The book is not overly long, running perhaps 150,000 words, and $20 plus a few mouse clicks on Amazon will provide you a copy to read and judge for yourself. But for those who desire a simple summary, Suvorov’s 2009 lecture at the Eurasia Forum of the Annapolis Naval Academy is conveniently available on YouTube, though slightly hindered by his weak English:

And also his C-SPAN Book TV lectures at the Woodrow Wilson Center:

Controversial theories, even if backed by seemingly strong evidence, can hardly be properly evaluated until they have been weighed against the counter-arguments of their strongest critics, and this should certainly be the case with the Suvorov Hypothesis. But although the last three decades have seen the development of a large secondary literature, much of it sharply critical, nearly all this international debate has taken place in Russian, German, or Hebrew, languages that I do not read.

There are some exceptions. Several years ago, I came across a website debate on the topic, and one strong critic claimed that Suvorov’s theories had been totally debunked by American military historian David M. Glantz in *Stumbling Colossus*, published in 1998. But when I ordered and read the book I was sorely disappointed. Although purporting to refute Suvorov, the author seemed to ignore almost all of his central arguments, and merely provided a rather dull and pedantic recapitulation of the standard narrative I had previously seen hundreds of times, laced with a few rhetorical excesses denouncing the unique vileness of the Nazi regime. Most ironically, Glantz emphasizes that although Suvorov’s analysis of the titanic Russo-German military struggle had gained great attention and considerable support among both Russian and German scholars, it had been generally ignored in the Anglo-American world, and he almost seems to imply that it can probably be disregarded for that reason. Perhaps this attitude reflected the cultural arrogance of many American intellectual elites during Russia’s disastrous Yeltsin Era of the late 1990s.

A far superior book, generally supportive of Suvorov’s framework, was *Stalin’s War of Annihilation*, by prize-winning German military historian Joachim Hoffmann, originally commissioned by the German Armed Forces and published in 1995 with an English revised edition appearing in 2001. The cover carries a notice that the text was cleared by German government censors, and the author’s introduction recounts the repeated threats of prosecution he endured from elected officials and the other legal obstacles he faced, while elsewhere he directly addresses himself to the unseen government authorities who he knows are reading over his shoulder. When stepping too far outside the bounds of accepted history carries the serious risk that a book’s entire print-run will be burned and the author imprisoned, a reader must necessarily be cautious at
evaluating the text since important sections have been skewed or preemptively excised in the interests of self-preservation. Evaluating scholarly debates on historical issues becomes difficult when one sides faces incarceration if their arguments are too bold.

Can we say whether Suvorov is right? Since our information gatekeepers of the English-language world have spent the last three decades closing their eyes and pretending that the Suvorov Hypothesis does not exist, the near-complete absence of any substantial reviews or critiques makes it very difficult for me to come to any definite conclusion. But based on the available evidence, I believe it is far more likely than not that Suvorov’s theories are at least substantially correct. And if so, our current understanding of World War II—the central formative event of our modern world—is entirely transformed.

Suvorov notes that treaties or pacts are traditionally named for the city in which they are signed—the Warsaw Pact, the Baghdad Pact, the Munich Agreement—and thus the so-called “Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact” signed in August 23, 1939 by which Hitler and Stalin agreed to the division of Poland should more properly be called “the Moscow Pact.” As a direct result of that agreement, Stalin gained half of Poland, the Baltic States, and various other advantages, including a direct border with Germany. Meanwhile, Hitler was punished by declarations of war from France and Britain, amid worldwide condemnation as a military aggressor. Although Germany and Russia both invaded Poland, the latter managed to avoid being dragged into any war with Poland’s erstwhile allies. Thus, the primary beneficiary of the Moscow Pact was clearly Moscow.

Given the long years of trench warfare on the Western front during the First World War, almost all outside observers expected the new round of the conflict to follow a very similar static pattern, gradually exhausting all sides, and the world has shocked when Germany’s innovative tactics allowed it to achieve a lightening defeat the allied armies in France during 1940. But at that point, Hitler regarded the war as essentially over, and was confident that the extremely generous peace terms he immediately offered the British would soon lead to a final settlement. As a consequence, he returned Germany to a regular peacetime economy, choosing butter over guns in order to maintain his high domestic popularity.

Stalin, however, was under no such political constraints, and from the moment he had signed his long-term peace agreement with Hitler in 1939 and divided Poland, he ramped up his total-war economy to an even higher notch. Embarking upon an unprecedented military buildup, he focused his production almost entirely upon purely offensive weapons systems, while even discontinuing those armaments better suited for defense and dismantling his defensive lines of fortifications. By 1941, his production cycle was complete, and he made his plans accordingly.

And so, just as in our traditional narrative, we see that in the weeks and months leading up to Barbarossa, the most powerful offensive military force in the history of the world was quietly assembled in secret along the German-Russian border, preparing for the order that would unleash their surprise attack. The enemy’s unprepared airforce was to be destroyed on the ground in the first days of the battle, and enormous tank columns would begin deep penetration thrusts, surrounding and trapping the opposing forces, achieving a classic
blitzkrieg victory, and ensuring the rapid occupation of vast territories. But the forces preparing this unprecedented war of conquest were Stalin’s, and his military juggernaut would surely have seized all of Europe, probably soon followed by the remainder of the Eurasian landmass.

Then at almost the last moment, Hitler suddenly realized the strategic trap into which he had fallen, and ordered his heavily outnumbered and outgunned troops into a desperate surprise attack of their own on the assembling Soviets, fortuitously catching them at the very point at which their own final preparations for sudden attack had left them most vulnerable, and thereby snatching a major initial victory from the jaws of certain defeat. Huge stockpiles of Soviet ammunition and weaponry had been positioned close to the border to supply the army of invasion into Germany, and these quickly fell into German hands, providing an important addition to their own woefully inadequate resources.

The enormous and fully-militarized resources of the Soviet state, supplemented by the contributions of Britain and America, did eventually turn the tide of battle and lead to a Soviet victory, but Stalin ended up with only half of Europe rather than its entirety. Suvorov argues that the fatal weakness of the Soviet system was its total inability to compete with non-Sovietized states in the peacetime production of civilian goods, and because such states had still survived after the war, the Soviet Union was doomed to eventual collapse.

Navrozov, the Chronicles reviewer, is a Russian Slav and therefore hardly favorable to the German dictator. But he closes his review with a remarkable statement:

Therefore, if any of us is free to write, publish, and read this today, it follows that in some not inconsequential part our gratitude for this must go to Hitler. And if someone wants to arrest me for saying what I have just said, I make no secret of where I live.

Source References