



The Chief Culprit: Stalin's Grand Design to Start World War II

by Viktor Suvorov

(Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, Maryland, 2008)

Review by **Andrei Navrozov**

The Russian edition of Viktor Suvorov's *Icebreaker: Who Started the Second World War?* sports a blurb on the back, quoting a review of the English translation of the book published in a British newspaper on May 5, 1990. Suvorov, runs the quotation, 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.

The book had been published by Hamish Hamilton, in those days a highly respectable house. The newspaper reviewing it was the yet magisterial *Times*, whose literary editor had given over to me almost the whole of the biweekly books page to do justice to a work, as I had told him, of outstanding importance. Using the term used by Coleridge of Kant in the *Biographia Literaria*, I said that Suvorov was "allbecrushing." The book sold 800 copies.

Some months later, a German edition of the book, under the title *Der Eisbrecher: Hitler in Stalins Kaulköl*, 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 5 million copies have been sold, making Suvorov the most read military historian in military 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 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 upwards of \$500. "Revisionism," meanwhile, had become the war cry of the politically correct, so that historians like Ernst Topisch, expressing ideas that were but pale shadows of Suvorov's, were now flirting with ostracism, if not prosecution. Now the Naval Institute in Annapolis has put itself on the line.

Suvorov has written 18 books, including an autobiography and several novels, translated into some twenty languages, but as an historian he is a man of one idea. The idea is to overturn twentieth-century historiography, a bastard discipline born of an unholy alliance between Stalin's Russia and the political elites of the democratic West. As the alliance was formed for the expedient of suppressing Hitler – whom Stalin had done his utmost to bring to power for political reasons and the West its utmost to foster for commercial reasons – naturally, in the wake of World War II, a common interpretation of history came into being, a generic pabulum capable of masking inconvenient lacunae and of obfuscating embarrassing contradictions.

The result was that I, growing up in Moscow under Khrushchev and Brezhnev in the 1960s, was fed the same Allied pap as any of my contemporaries growing up in London, Berlin, New York, Tokio or Bombay. Between Soviet films about the war and the BBC "World at War" there were only differences of style, as today there are but differences of style between the Kremlin's official view of the past and, say, Antony Beevor's *Stalingrad*. Not surprisingly, some 30 books have been written since 1990, in Russia, Germany, Israel, and elsewhere, to refute Suvorov's thesis, while a popular Russian singer by the name of Rosenbaum has called on war veterans in the audience to "waste" him.

Suvorov was not frightened by Rosenbaum. He had been an officer in the GRU, Soviet Army intelligence, until his defection in Britain in 1978. To the death penalty for defection to which he was subsequently condemned by the court martial, another was added in due course by the KGB, for revealing state secrets. Neither of these has been repealed. Yet the "state secrets" that Suvorov has been revealing are joint Soviet-American secrets, with the laudable consequence that the good lie about the good war is now a good deal more transparent.

The Chief Culprit incorporates by reference, as a lawyer might say, the main argument of *Icebreaker*, putting it into the broader context of Soviet history. On Soviet history Suvorov is good, though it is not his forte, which is specifically the history of the war, the stuff of *Icebreaker*. But as neither the latter, nor its two sequels, *Day M* and *The Last Republic*, is available to the American reader, I assure him that *The Chief Culprit* is the only cogent analysis of World War II that exists in English today.

Unlike the war historians Churchill and Roosevelt, with skeletons of their own – whether of duplicity or, worse still, of innocence or ineptitude – deep in history's closet, Suvorov has no objective apart from exposing the bare bones of the matter. He possesses a photographic memory and is obsessed with weapons technology, qualifications that have enabled him, in the research of the *Icebreaker* trilogy, to read the war as an archaeologist reads the spearheads and arrowheads of a long-lost civilization, a palimpsest of military construction orders given and countermanded, an archive of dictators' intentions and illusions. Sometimes, at first glance, this seems hard going, but the reader's reward is never long in coming, as here, when he describes a single fortification in the Finnish War:

The Finns used cement of the brand “600” in the construction of their fortifications. For every cubic meter of concrete, they used 95 kilograms of steel armature. Here are the results: Soviet 280-m mortar guns and 203-mm howitzers fired directly on the Finnish strongpoint named “pillbox no. 0031.” They used specially designed ammunition for firing on concrete. A 203-mm shell for the B-4 howitzer weighs 100 kg. The 280-mm shell for the B-5 mortar weighs 246 kg. There were 1,043 of the 203-mm shells and 116 of the 280-mm ones fired at the pillbox no. 0031. One hundred and thirty-two tons of shells for one pillbox!

I dare say this one paragraph reveals more about Stalin’s war machine than all of Antony Beevor’s books put together.

Suvorov’s principal contention, familiar even to those who only know of his work secondhand, is that Stalin created the scarecrow Hitler in order to sick him on the great democracies of Europe, including Britain, and then to strike at the overextended Germany from the rear and to wrest these possessions from the villain. Is not liberation the very core of Communist ideology? Hence the term “Icebreaker,” used by Stalin as a code name for the other man with the moustache.

Unexpectedly for Stalin, and sensing that he had fallen into Stalin’s trap, Hitler attacked Russia on June 22, 1941 – without accurate intelligence, without adequate transport, without antifreeze, without warm clothing for his troops, and in the possession of only 3,350 tanks of all types combined as compared to Stalin’s 4,000 *amphibious* tanks out of a total of some 20,000. The element of surprise would enable Hitler to prolong his nation’s agony for another four years, but in Suvorov’s analysis Operation Barbarossa was the desperate act of a congenital suicide – or that of a war hero, which is what Hitler had been for his comrades-in-arms in World War I. Its indubitable achievement, however, lies in the fact that only in the wake of Barbarossa was the West able to regroup and in the end save at least half of Europe, including Britain, from Stalin’s liberating clutches.

The other man with a moustache was the bloodiest of Stalin’s exterminators, and one who proved the most difficult to exterminate. He was Stalin’s tool of world domination and, when it unexpectedly crashed down on his head, his undoing. The awesome military potential Stalin had accumulated for an offensive strike at Germany in July or August 1941 was scattered like so many straws in the first days, weeks, and months of Barbarossa. Therefore, if any of us are 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 somebody wants to arrest me for saying what I have just said, I make no secret of where I live.