

# H-Diplo | ISSF

## POLICY Series

### America and the World—2017 and Beyond

**Response to Geoffrey Roberts, *Stalin, Trump, and the Politics of Narcissism: A Response to Rose McDermott's The Nature of Narcissism.***

<https://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/Policy-Roundtable-1-5BG.pdf>

Response by **Uri Bar-Joseph**, Haifa University, Emeritus

Published on **2 July 2018** | [issforum.org](https://issforum.org)

Editor: Diane Labrosse

Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

---

Shortlink: <http://tiny.cc/PR-1-5BG-Response>

Permalink: <http://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-5BG-Response>

PDF URL: <http://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/Policy-Roundtable-1-5BG-Response.pdf>

Geoffrey Roberts's criticism of our discussion of Joseph Stalin's personal role in facilitating the Soviet failure to correctly estimate the German threat prior to Operation Barbarossa of June 1941,<sup>1</sup> focused on three main arguments. First, that his behavior on the eve of the attack was not the result of unique psychological elements but of a "political rationale." Second, that the intelligence information concerning the looming threat was not unequivocal and that there was a foundation for Stalin's suspicion that the war warnings were the product of British deception. Third, that Stalin should not be singled out for his mistaken estimate since there were other "Soviet decision-makers" who believed that war was not imminent. I briefly address each of these reservations.

What motivated Stalin to object to almost every request to raise the state of alert of the Red Army in the weeks that led to the war is a matter of speculation. Suffice it to say that even though the Soviet generals shared his "political rationale" that war should be delayed to 1942, they nevertheless demanded, beginning in May, when it became clear that the German attack was imminent, that necessary measures be taken to meet the threat. Stalin refused overwhelmingly. Only a day before fire commenced did he reluctantly agree to take some minimal measures, while still adhering to his wishful thinking that war could be avoided until 1942. We claim that his mistaken information processing, which was not shared by others, was the product of his unique psychological elements. Roberts rejects this explanation. However, he has to explain why, despite a shared political interest in avoiding war in 1941, General Gregory Zhukov, the Chief of General Staff, and the Defense Commissar, Marshal Semen Timoshenko, assessed war as highly likely while Stalin did not.

---

<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Roberts, "Stalin, Trump, and the Politics of Narcissism: A Response to Rose McDermott's "The Nature of Narcissism," <https://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-5bg-stalin>.

The quality of the intelligence information that became available before the imminent German attack is impressive by any standard. Roberts argues that it was painted by Stalin's distrust, which caused him to regard it as a product of a British disinformation campaign. Stalin certainly thought so, but this raises three main issues: First, what type of person would believe that the hundreds of Soviet spies, all over the world, from Berlin to Tokyo, who proved their reliability before, had suddenly become the tools of British intelligence? Given that Stalin rejected categorically all his spies' warnings as a product of British deception, we concluded that his systemic denial was motivated less by the quality of information and more by his paranoia, tendency towards conspiracy theories, and high need for closure. Second, fear of British deception cannot explain Stalin's denial of the thousands of warning indicators showing that close to four million enemy soldiers were deploying along the Soviet border. Third, the Germans conducted hundreds of reconnaissance flights over Soviet territory prior to the war and the Russians were aware of it. No fear of British deception can account for Stalin's order to avoid shooting down the airplanes, which is considered by one expert as "probably the single greatest error committed by Stalin between the summer of 1940 and June 22, 1941."<sup>2</sup>

Last stands Roberts' claim that Stalin was not alone and that other "Soviet decision-makers" made similar mistakes. This claim is highly problematic. To start with, there were no other "Soviet decision-makers" in 1941. The people around Stalin had no independence in the decision-making process; they knew that confronting him would mean an immediate death threat and they indulged in guessing his way of thinking to avoid this fate. Moreover, we do not have sufficient evidence to conclude that others erred like Stalin, but even if they did, they did not see all the relevant information, they regarded Stalin as a genius, and, above all, they feared him. As for the professionals who were exposed to the intelligence information – the senior army and intelligence officers – they estimated that war was certain but had to yield to Stalin's orders or please him for fear for their lives. Zhukov explained it clearly when writing in his memoirs that ignoring Stalin orders to avoid a military deployment on the eve of the war would have brought him immediately to "Beria's basement." General Golikov, who headed Military Intelligence (RU), admitted in 1965 that "I distorted intelligence to please Stalin because I feared him."<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> David E. Murphy, *What Stalin Knew: The Enigma of Barbarossa* (Yale University Press, 2005), 162.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Overy, *Russia's War* (New York: Penguin, 1989), 69; *Murphy*, 249.