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Who Really Won World War II?

By Alexei Bayer

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Russians react nervously to any narrative about World War II that differs from their own. When the United States, Britain or France pay tribute to their countrymen who fought and defeated Adolf Hitler, it is seen in Moscow as an attempt to diminish Russia's contribution. Russians hold it as self-evident that they bore the brunt of Hitler's fury and did the lion's share of fighting with only minimal support from the Allies.

It is a remarkably ungenerous attitude. On the 70th anniversary of the Soviet Union's entry into the war, Russians should acknowledge the contribution of its allies. Britain in particular can — and rightly does — claim a very special role in standing up to Germany.

Let's rewind the clock to June 21, 1941, and see how the situation looked from London. By then, Britain had been at war for nearly two years. Its two allies, Poland and France, had been defeated and dismembered. All of Europe was either under German occupation or hostile to Britain. British cities had been severely bombed by the Luftwaffe, and a land invasion was still a strong possibility.

While Britain faced Germany in the west, Hitler and Josef Stalin concluded an unholy alliance in the east that lasted for nearly two years, attacking and occupying several nations. The Soviet Union had put its vast natural resources at Hitler's disposal, helping Germany wage its war and rendering useless Britain's sole weapon, its naval superiority.

Many Russian historians still claim that the Molotov-Ribbentrop nonaggression pact, signed Aug. 23, 1939, was an alliance of convenience. Stalin had been given a cold shoulder by Britain and France when he proposed an antifascist alliance. Moreover, since the Soviet Union was not prepared to fight Hitler, he had no choice, we are told, but to delay the war by feigning friendship with Germany.

But compare this with what Britain and France did in 1939. They were also unprepared to fight, but they ended the policy of appeasement that surrendered Czechoslovakia in 1938 and came to the defense of Poland.

Russians inflicted more casualties on Germans than other allies and suffered more casualties than all other countries combined. But that was, in a large measure, the result of Stalin's disastrous preparations. Britain suffered far fewer losses and less destruction, but you can't blame it for maintaining a strong navy and mobilizing for the defense of the home islands, thus discouraging Hitler from ordering a land invasion.

When the Soviet Union entered the war 70 years ago, it never had to stand alone. It was supported by Britain — despite Stalin's previous alliance with Hitler — and the United States promptly established a program to supply Moscow with war materiel, food and clothing. In reality, with the United States entering the war in December 1941, even the loss of Moscow would not have meant a Soviet defeat. While German supply lines were dangerously stretched, Soviet troops could have regrouped east of the capital thanks to a U.S. commitment to supply the Red Army through Northeastern Siberia.

Russians have every right to mourn their losses and be proud of the heroism of their people. But Russia should also acknowledge that all the allies of the anti-Hitler coalition made vital contributions and huge sacrifices to achieve victory. The war was fought, and won, by the entire alliance.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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