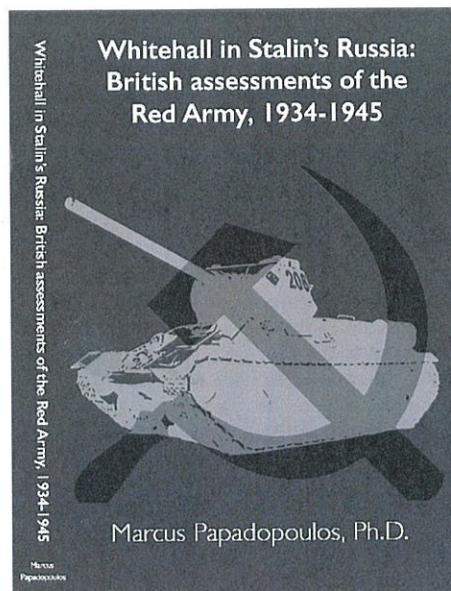


**Whitehall in Stalin's Russia: British Assessments of the Red Army, 1934-1945**  
By Marcus Papadopoulos (Tricorn Books, 2023, ISBN: 978-1914615573, 274pp, £8.99)

Marcus Papadopoulos's engaging book focuses on the British military's appraisal of the strengths and weaknesses of the Red Army from the mid-1930s onwards. Shot through with racism, ethnic stereotyping and prejudice against barbaric, backward Asiatic Russia, these British assessments were invariably negative. According to numerous British military observers stationed in the Soviet Union, the Red Army was good for

defence but lacked the ability to conduct effective offensive operations, its infantry was tough but lacked initiative, it had some good equipment but lacked the educated and trained officers to properly use it. Above all, the Red Army was deemed inferior to Western armies and military technologies.



Papadopoulos traces the Russophobia of many of these British officers to imperial rivalries in the nineteenth century, especially the perceived tsarist threat to India. Ingrained anti-communists, many of them served alongside White armies during the Russian Civil War. By no means were all their criticisms of the Red Army off beam, but they consistently failed to grasp that the Soviets were well aware of the problems of their armed forces and took successful steps to rectify them.

However, British assessments were far from uniformly negative. Some of Britain's military attachés and observers were able to see beyond their prejudices. The impact on British policy of these alternative voices depended on the situation.

In the context of growing threats from Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, the Red Army was seen as a potentially very important military ally. That positive assessment was knocked sideways by Stalin's purge of the Soviet officer corps in 1937-38, providing ammunition for those striving for political reasons to downplay Soviet military effectiveness in the event of a British war with Germany. That negative assessment of the Red Army's military capabilities was reinforced by what seemed to be a poor performance during the Winter War with Finland in 1939-40. Unsurprisingly, when the Germans launched Operation Barbarossa in June 1941, most British military experts expected the invasion to succeed.

The Red Army's successful defence of Moscow in autumn 1941 prompted a reappraisal of that pessimistic view but it re-emerged when the Germans launched their 1942 summer offensive. It was only the German defeat at Stalingrad that finally marginalised overly negative views of the Red Army as an effective fighting force. But the Russophobia and anti-communism never went away. The greater the Red Army's success, the more intense were fears the Bolshevik menace would threaten Britain next.

An interesting sub-story of Papadopoulos's narrative is that British political opinion was often quite positive about Soviet military prowess and quite optimistic about the prospects for a postwar alliance with the USSR. Indeed, Foreign Office officials and British diplomats were so appalled by the anti-sovietism of British military personnel sent to serve in Moscow that they asked for them to be recalled to London!

Papadopoulos is not the first historian to note how these changing perceptions of the Red Army's strengths and weaknesses impacted on British policy towards the USSR, but no one else has done it in such detail. Effectively written and based on an impressive array of sources, the book tells this important story very well.

*Geoffrey Roberts*