




*Above:* Seweryn Bialer;  
*right:* Approach to  
Birkenau, photograph  
by Joan Afferica, 2005.



# War's Reality in the Life and Work of Seweryn Bialer

BY JOAN AFFERICA AND  
RONALD MEYER

**A**n article about Seweryn Bialer (1926–2019) could well reiterate his contributions to the Harriman Institute, to Columbia University, to students, to the many beneficiaries in the United States and abroad who benefited from his knowledge about events and processes in the period of the Cold War. They would recognize the broad range of subjects he taught in the Department of Political Science and the School of General Studies. They might know something of his administrative

experience with the Research Institute on International Change or the Harriman Institute as well as of his membership on the Board of Supervisors of the School of International and Public Affairs and the executive committees of the Political Science and Sociology departments. They may have heard he was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Council on Foreign Relations, the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London, and the Carnegie Foundation on International Studies, among other organizations. They may have witnessed the whirl of departures for Washington, London, Moscow, Havana, or Beijing. The curriculum vitae is long.

This article, however, will focus on some experiences and stimuli in his less-known younger life that nurtured an unflinching pursuit of knowledge and on the never-fading memories that underlay his preoccupation with the history of a period in which he and his family suffered dislocation, hunger, pain, and the expectation of imminent death. It will attempt to show something of the determination, willpower, and luck that enabled him to survive and, with years of hard work, to gain a professional reputation of merit in this university and in this country.

This article introduces the context for two unpublished draft documents from Bialer's legacy of personal papers that follow. The first document affords a glimpse of a grievous past with his recollections of the war's end in 1945 and some thoughts on his early commitment to communism. The second document presents his approach to the war's origins. The first was intended to serve as the preface, the second as the introduction, to his unfinished, last major work on the Second World War in the East.

Perhaps Bialer's first public appearance in the United States, following his abandonment of Poland in January 1956, may be dated June 1956, when he testified for three days before a closed U.S. Senate subcommittee hearing that was investigating the "Scope of Soviet Activity in the United States." Without knowledge of English he was accompanied by a distinguished interpreter, Professor Jan Karski of Georgetown University, known as the courageous Polish courier who had brought directly to President Roosevelt a firsthand account of atrocities against Jews in concentration camps. Bialer, asked to relate his positions in Poland at the time of his defection, listed membership in the Central Committee Party *aktiv*, the roughly 200 senior Party officials employed by the Central Committee. In that capacity he was responsible for anti-Western propaganda. He was in addition secretary of the Party Committee in the Institute of Social Sciences and the Higher School of Marxism-Leninism; ideological adviser to *Tribuna*

Soviet army entering  
Warsaw in January  
1945. Reproduction  
Marek Skorupski /  
FORUM.

*Ludu*, the official Party newspaper; and research scholar for the School of Economic Sciences, Polish Academy of Sciences. An author of several political science textbooks, he had written as well a doctoral dissertation on the U.S. Marshall Plan for the program in political economy at the Institute for the Education of Scientific Cadres of the Central Committee of the Polish Communist Party. Charged with the organization of anti-Western propaganda, he was privy to confidential memoranda, orders, and letters addressed to the Central Committee and in contact with peers in the Soviet Union and other countries in the





Bialer with President Ronald Reagan at a lunch for Soviet experts and senior staff in the Roosevelt Room of the White House, May 11, 1988.

## The whirl of departures for Washington, London, Moscow, Havana, or Beijing.

Eastern bloc. In sum he had access to the nerve centers of the Polish Communist Party. He proved to be an unexpected and unmatched source.

The senators who questioned the 29-year-old expert would have no knowledge of the route traveled by the 18-year-old who made his way in 1945 from his last work camp at Friedland, on the border with Czechoslovakia, through devastated Poland to Warsaw. Confined at the age of 13

with his family to the Łódź Ghetto, it was there he began what became a lifelong study of Marxist theory. There he joined the Anti-Fascist Youth Movement, a Communist-sponsored study group, and risked taking part in the ghetto underground,

which earned him one among several medals awarded to him in the postwar period by the Polish government. As the Łódź Ghetto was being emptied in 1944 in the face of the Soviet advance, Bialer was transported by train to Auschwitz-Birkenau and in 1945 through Gross-Rosen to Friedland.

Upon reaching Warsaw in the summer of 1945, the idealistic young man, uneducated and unskilled, believed that it was his duty as a Communist to seek factory work. The forewoman informed him at the outset that the Germans had made one mistake in Poland: they did not kill all the Jews—an opinion, she continued, that was shared by everyone working in this factory. Soon he turned to the Party for direction. At the time his only choice for a high school education was a militia training base where, owing to his ability, he attained the rank of captain and at the age of 19 became head of the

political department of this Citizens' Militia Training Center. From there he moved into Party organizations, rising quickly, despite his age. The Party leadership gave priority to an urgent need to create an intelligentsia capable of governing the country, given the earlier brutal destruction of Polish intellectuals by both Nazi and Soviet rulers.

Bialer's first publication in the United States was entitled "I Chose Truth: A Former Leading Polish Communist's Story" (*News from Behind the Iron Curtain*, October 1956). This document was read in English translation into the record of the Senate proceedings, broadcast in Polish for Radio Free Europe, and dropped in thousands of copies from balloons flown over his homeland. The essay detailed his rise in the Communist Party and his "political, moral, and ideological" reasons for rejecting the Party. After many years of working in the Communist system at the highest levels, he had concluded that it was an "antidemocratic system which could not exist without poverty, waste, and falsehood." Stalin's death in 1953 did not end dictatorship but merely changed the players who engaged in the same "Stalinist and Beria-like methods." He grounded his assertion in documents and conversations that shed light on the actions of Beria, Tito, Malenkov, Molotov, and Khrushchev. He argued that the Party leadership feared the progress of the Thaw: "I had access to many documents and I know the way comrades from the Politburo tried to smother and suppress the so-called 'Thaw.'" Bialer's defection had taken place a month before Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" (February 25, 1956). Might he otherwise have remained in Poland with the promise of a distinguished future?



## I had access to many documents and know how the Politburo suppressed the Thaw. —Seweryn Bialer

Toward the end of his Senate testimony Bialer was asked to recommend what policy the United States should follow with regard to Poland. “I believe,” he replied, “that the most important thing is this: Let the American people convince the Polish people that they first sympathize with them, and, secondly, that the Americans will never reconcile themselves with the loss of freedom in Poland.” Bialer would be summoned to Capitol Hill numerous times from the 1950s through the 1990s to address U.S.-Soviet relations, the Soviet political economy, and the Soviet role in Asia.

Bialer remained in Washington with a new identity, working as a research

Seweryn Bialer, 1950s.

analyst of Soviet and East European affairs for various government agencies. It was Seweryn Bialer, however, who moved in 1963 to New York and entered the doctoral program in political science at Columbia University, where he remained until his retirement in 1996 as the Robert and Renée Belfer Professor of International Relations. His doctoral dissertation, “Soviet Political Elites: Concept, Sample, Case Study” (1966), was a painstaking study on early computer punch cards of members elected to the Soviet Central Committee from 1939 to 1965. This work contributed in a major way to elaborating the concept of *nomenklatura*, a significant notion in later study of the Soviet leadership.

Rather than publishing his dissertation, however, Bialer chose to concentrate on the stream of Soviet World War II military memoirs that benefited from Khrushchev’s Thaw. *Stalin and His Generals: Soviet Military Memoirs of World War II* (Souvenir Press, 1969) was hailed in the *New York Times* as “an unprecedented glimpse of Stalin through the eyes of his associates” (April 27, 1969).

Bialer’s next book, *Stalin’s Successors: Leadership, Stability, and Change in the Soviet Union* (1980), secured his position as a leading expert in Soviet studies. His achievement was recognized three years later when he was awarded the MacArthur Fellowship, the first ever granted to a political scientist and the only one awarded to a Sovietologist.

In his final book, *The Soviet Paradox: External Expansion, Internal Decline* (Knopf, 1986), Bialer laid bare the fundamental paradox of Soviet rule: that

the long-term survival of the Soviet Union depended upon the processes of democratization and *glasnost*, which were required for economic modernization, but which also imperiled the entire authority basis of the Soviet system itself. Writing for the *New York Times Book Review*, Peter Reddaway singled out for particular praise the “masterly chapter” that details the rise and suppression of Poland’s Solidarity movement as a “critical turning-point in the history of the Soviet empire” (July 27, 1986).

But rather than repeat material easily found in the tributes to Seweryn Bialer written after his death and the obituary published in the *New York Times* on February 21, 2019, not to mention entries in Wikipedia and other online sources, we turn the reader’s attention to the two draft manuscripts that follow. They introduce the subject on which he was thinking consciously and unconsciously all his adult life, namely, a study of the Second World War in the East. In his curriculum vitae it has the working title “Russia at War: The Nazi-Soviet Conflict.”

And we close this introduction to Seweryn Bialer’s manuscripts with the knowledge that when illness denied the book’s completion, he asked to be read aloud in Russian a book he knew almost by heart: Konstantin Simonov’s novel *Zhivye i mertvye* (The Living and the Dead), the moving chronicle of the first months on Russia’s Western border. He thus returned to the fate of the Red Army soldier with whom he had “suffered the defeats and rejoiced at the victories” in Poland 70 years earlier.

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# Draft Preface and Introduction to “Russia at War: The Nazi-Soviet Conflict”

BY SEWERYN BIALER

## PREFACE

I saw my last armed German soldier, and my first armed Red Army soldier, on May 9, 1945—the day that the war with Germany officially ended with the Nazi capitulation. I was perched behind a tree on a rocky hill about 100 feet above a road that crossed the German border and the Sudetenland and close to which, about less than a mile, the concentration camp Friedland was placed, where I had been incarcerated the last months of the war. Both I and a large group of the camp inmates were able to escape after the death of Hitler was announced in the first days of May. By that time most of the SS soldiers who regularly guarded the prisoners escaped to the West and were supplanted by mostly drunk Ukrainian SS or even Volkssturm. The barbed wires surrounding the camp were not electrified anymore and it was possible

to escape the camp with limited risk at night in places where the lights were missing. On May 9, the last SS troops were moving south and by afternoon the Red Army storm troops arrived. I could see from the hill the red banner that was raised over my camp. I ran from the hill, still in my striped camp “uniform,” my head adorned with a “promenade of lice,” my feet in wooden clogs, and I do not know how I jumped onto the gun-carriage of a horse-drawn artillery piece where a young Russian soldier held the reins. To his visible astonishment I started to sing the Russian patriotic song “*Yesli zavtra voina*” (If There’s War Tomorrow), which as I will explain later was unintentionally very ironic.

The war started in earnest for me on September 7, 1939, when the German troops marched into Łódź (which they renamed Litzmannstadt), the second largest city in Poland, where I lived with my family. I was then 12 years old and was facing almost six years of Nazi rule, first in the Łódź Ghetto and then in Auschwitz and other concen-

tration camps. I grew up fast, started to work in a factory that produced electrical motors, and in 1941 became a member of the Anti-Fascist Youth Movement, which was in fact a Communist organization, the only organization in our large factory that was engaged in thinking and activities that went beyond the effort “only” to survive.

After the disasters of 1939–41, when all of Europe was ruled or aligned with Hitler, the only hope that kept me and most of my family and friends spiritually alive and prevented our descent into “walking dead,” as far as such fate was dependent on non-physical factors, was the expectation that the Soviet Union would break its ties with Germany and in a powerful attack defeat its armed forces and liberate us from the certain death that awaited us from the Nazis. For the entire Ghetto the German attack on the Soviet Union of June 22, 1941, came as a virtual festival of joyous expectations. The incredible German

Łódź Ghetto, February 9, 1942.



Harriman Institute director Robert Legvold with Bialer at a seminar (November 18, 1987).



victorious march toward Moscow in 1941, and, even more so, the Red Army defeats in the summer of 1942, left most of my family and acquaintances with only remnants of the initial hope and with deep resignation to meet the fate that the Nazis were preparing for us.

Yet not many among the small circle of my comrades in the Communist organization abandoned hope and withdrew from any activity under the shock of what for us was the unexplainable, because of our beliefs, near collapse of the Soviet colossus. We mentally and emotionally fought with the Red Army every step of its struggle with the Germans, suffering its defeats and elated by its victories. It should therefore come as no surprise that I wanted to write a book about the Nazi-Soviet conflict for a very long time, probably all my adult life. I hope by doing so to explain for myself why our elation of June 22, 1941, was so bitterly disappointed, and why nevertheless the cruel but just end-verdict on the Nazi state and its German supporters was achieved primarily by the sacrifice and determination of the Red Army.

My early allegiance to the Communist faith [in the Łódź Ghetto] was primarily intellectual: it explained to a nonreligious boy why the world turns and provided satisfying, authoritative answers to the many questions that he faced. It permitted a Jew who was deeply frightened by the German overlords to feel superior in most basic ways over the same Germans. It provided a sense of a closed community and sure support in conditions of

extreme suffering and danger. It built an emotional and rational basis for the feeling that almost never abandoned me, not of personal survival, but of the unavoidable defeat of the evil of Nazism. And finally it provided a virtualization of the force of the ideology by the presence of the Soviet Union, its powerful army, and its wise leader.

The confrontation in 1945 of the idea and the reality of the Red Army and the “New Soviet Man” was a harsh blow that could, however, be rationalized by the always rational ideology; by my very survival that was brought almost miraculously not a moment too soon; by the lack of even basic education and culture; by the lack of information from those who knew the “real” reality and were afraid to communicate it to a Communist; and by the monopoly of “heavy” readings confined by the Communist regime to the “Holy Script.”

After the war I received my education in social sciences, apart from the Party School, at Warsaw University and the Institutes of the Academy of Sciences. I was also educated in Soviet military science. Yet slowly my commitment

## My early allegiance to the Communist faith was primarily intellectual.

was being undermined intellectually by confrontation with published untruths pronounced by the Party leaders, particularly in 1952. The single most important incident occurred, however, in July 1953, three months after the death of Stalin and three days after the arrest in Moscow of Beria, the chief of the Soviet secret police. [It was then that Aleksandr Zawadski, later President of Poland, recounted to me the truth about his wartime experience in the Soviet Union.]

By 1955, my last year in Poland, my career in the Party was on a sure path to a “favorable future.” I was First Secretary of the Party organization in the Higher Party School, a Lecturer for the Central Committee of the Party, and a Reader in Political Economy at the Par-

ty's Institute of Education and Scientific Cadres. In December of that same year I began my escape to the West.

I have wanted to write a book on the Russo-German war for a very long time, probably all my adult life. I started to research the subject seriously in the 1960s and published with the help of

Joseph Stalin with Georgy Malenkov, Lavrenty Beria, and Vyacheslav Molotov, Moscow Kremlin, 1948.



my wife *Stalin and His Generals* (Pegasus, 1969), the first collection in English of excerpts from Soviet war memoirs that was based on the stream of new memoirs appearing in the Soviet Union after the 20th Party Congress and Khrushchev's "secret" speech.

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## INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 20th century many historians predicted an era of mankind's rapid and benevolent progress owing to the advance of education and science and the expansion and intensification of technological development. Mass education would "inevitably" carry with it an increased rationality of mankind's behavior. The explosion of technological prowess would not only make the planet more habitable and peoples' material aspirations easier to satisfy, but also it would make wars impossible between nations entering the industrial age because of their predictable destructiveness.

At the beginning of the present century there are very few historians who in retrospect fail

to portray the 20th century as particularly vile, violent, and destructive in mankind's history. In most cases the formative process leading to the tragedies of the past century is seen in the First World War, which undermined any preceding positive expectations for the future. Volker Berghahn and others are convincing in their position that the chasm between the decades that separated the two world wars is, to a large extent, artificial and grounded in the Eurocentric bias of historians. Nevertheless, the First World War, because of its unimaginable level of human losses and its material and spiritual destruction, marked a watershed in the experience of European countries, which controlled the bulk of global military and economic power.

It is easy, however, to forget that the *stakes* in this war were rather limited, despite the total character of mobilization and the terrible losses. The Allied victory did not endanger Germany's existence as a major sovereign power, nor would a German victory have brought an end to France and Great Britain as great powers. In fact, as a result of the First World War, no power achieved a high level of hegemony over the European continent. Moreover, as a result of the collapse of the weak Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires (which would in all probability have dissolved even without the war), the distribution of nation-state power became rather more fragmented than it was before the war. The only power that really profited from the war, the United States, shortly after its end withdrew from the Continent, consistent with its cultural and political traditions and preferences.

From the point of view of the outcome at stake, the Second World War





was from its beginning very different. Nazi Germany's victory over Great Britain, as was the case with Poland and France, would have led to the dissolution of a sovereign nation-state and an end to a way of life. Moreover, with Germany's attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941, there emerged for a short period of time a true potential for a nontraditional, vicious dictatorial system to establish its rule over the entire European continent. The Nazi victory in war with the Soviet Union, or a rapid and complete Soviet victory over Germany, would almost certainly have created a situation in which such rule would have been established.

The Nazi-Soviet war was not simply another phase of the war Hitler started in September 1939 with the attack on Poland and finished with the conquest

disastrously on the Second." Howard is seconded by Niall Ferguson, who wonders whether in fact there was "really such a thing as the Second World War." The crucial segment of this war, as David Reynolds suggests, was exactly the period on which I intend to concentrate my analysis. "International events in 1940 and 1941 undoubtedly shook the foundations of contemporary thinking," writes Reynolds. "In many ways this period was the 'fulcrum' of the 20th century, the turning point in the endgame of the old Europe-centered order."<sup>1</sup> Stressing the eventual American domination of the 20th century, one has still to remember that the crucial dynamic for this era was provided by the *unavoidable* clash of the two totalitarian empires—those of Hitler and

of Yugoslavia and Greece 20 months later. In this early war the entire European continent was either conquered or allied to Germany or neutral. As Sir Michael Howard suggests, the attack on Russia on June 22, 1941, started a new, separate war, with different aims and different rules—a vicious slaughterhouse with no analog in modern history. "Germany," he proposes, "had to win the interrupted First World War before it was able to embark so

Stalin. These two regimes could enter into contractual relations while trying to out-guess their opponent. They could, as they did, clash in a total war, but they could not ignore each other. Their preoccupation with one another was so close because they had much more in common than with any other regime to which they were allied or opposed. For Stalin, the real opponent of Communist movements in capitalist countries was not the fascist but the Social Democrat who competed for loyalty of the working classes. For Hitler, on his way to power, the real opponent was not the Communist who necessarily served as the specter that frightened the establishment into appointing him chancellor of Germany. Rather it was the Center parties that could provide an alternative, as well as the social extremists and adventurers in his own ranks which could intimidate the establishment. When Hitler and Stalin faced each other, they knew that for the first time they were facing their ultimate challenge, their mirror image, an image that they both admired and hated with a passion unequalled in any of their other encounters.

Yet one can abstract from ideological counter-positions or constraints and look at the period 1938 to 1941 from the point of view of the logic of great power ambitions and fears. It seems that the results would not have been different; the German and Soviet regimes would clash regardless. While Nazi and Communist ideology contributed to the virulence of their clash, it was not the decisive ingredient as their cooperation in 1939–1940 has shown. (One could risk the proposition that "ideology" played a greater role in the actions of the allegedly most "pragmatic" country—the United States.)

## International events in 1940–41 undoubtedly shook the foundations of contemporary thinking.

Germany and Russia shared their greatest fear: a common front of other countries against either of them. Their second greatest fear was also similar: for the Soviet Union—a German attack on the Soviet Union following the German defeat of Great Britain and its full control of Europe; for Germany—a Soviet attack while Germany was fighting an England receiving increasing lend-lease help from the United States.

At some point Germany had to attack the Soviet Union. It dared not risk having a powerful and growing presence in its rear while it was engaging more intensely in the struggle with Britain. (This is true in addition to the other authentic rationale for the war—the search for “Lebensraum,” which would end Germany’s chronic shortages of resources for the war.) At some point the Soviet Union had to attack Germany. It dared not see England defeated and Germany establishing and exploiting complete domination over Europe. (The Soviets were concerned not only with the balance of power in Europe and the Middle East, but also with the increasing odds of a Japanese attack.)

For Germany the crucial point would arrive when England refused to capitulate or to sign an agreement with Hitler and when Soviet military power had grown to become

potentially dangerous. For the Soviet Union the crucial point would arrive when Germany made an all-out effort to defeat England or was able to reach a peaceful solution to their conflict. *The middle of the year 1941 was the most obvious critical period for both countries to reach a decision.* While the Soviets could still wait for a while, the realities of climate in a war against Russia made a German decision more urgent.

As it happened, Germany suffered a total loss in the war, and the Soviet Union’s victory was far from rapid and was achieved with the decisive participation of the United States, which, moreover, contrary to tradition, did not withdraw from the European continent at the war’s end. Moreover, taking into consideration the extraordinary expenditure of blood and material resources

required to gain the military victory, the actual Soviet gain, both territorially and materially, was far from what the Soviets had hoped when the Second World War started with their substantial help. In this sense, both dictatorial regimes lost in their clash with one another. The Nazi defeat was immediate, complete, and evident. The Soviet victory in the short run made it a superpower, but it also undermined the foundation of its economic ambition to become modern in fields other than military. ■

<sup>1</sup> Quotations from Michael Howard, *Liberation or Catastrophe: Reflections on the History of the 20th Century* (NY: Continuum, 1992); Niall Ferguson, *The War of the World: Twentieth-Century Conflict and the Descent of the West* (NY: Penguin Press, 2006); and David Reynolds, *From Munich to Pearl Harbor: Roosevelt’s America and the Origins of the Second World War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001). [Eds.]

Seweryn Bialer (right) with Georgy Arbatov (left, foreground), director of the Institute for US and Canadian Studies, at the airport on their way to Dartmouth Conference XV, 1986, Baku.

