

Ungváry Krisztián: **The Gambler, the
Chessmaster, and the Useful Idiots**

Theses of the Habilitation

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Eszterházy Károly Katolikus Egyetem

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Since obtaining my PhD in 1999 and the Title of Doctor of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA) in 2013, I have authored several monograph-length studies. Notable among these are my works on Hungary's entry into the war and the attempted breakout of October 15, 1944, as well as my volume on Miklós Horthy, all of which formulated numerous new theses. For the current habilitation procedure, I am submitting my volume published in the autumn of 2025, titled **"The Gambler, the Chessmaster, and the Useful Idiots – The Shattering of Europe 1922–1941."**

The most important new findings of the work are as follows:

1. The widely held assertion in the existing literature—claiming that the armed forces of the Western Allies were insufficient at any point between 1933 and 1939 to confront the German army with a reasonable hope of success—is erroneous. In fact, from a military perspective, the Western Allies maintained superiority throughout, and this advantage could be described as overwhelming until the occupation of the remaining Czech territories on March 15, 1939. German generals themselves were aware of this; it is no coincidence that the anti-Hitler conspiracy among the high command of the Wehrmacht began specifically during the 1938 Czechoslovak crisis. While hindsight based on subsequent German successes may make it appear as though the German army possessed crushing material and tactical superiority, prior to the French campaign, no one could have

foreseen that the Wehrmacht would be able to defeat a better-equipped, more numerous opponent with significantly superior material resources in just a few weeks. The French and British political and military decision-makers of the time had no objective basis for such pessimism.

2. It is also a misconception in the prevailing literature that an anti-fascist coalition against Germany ever represented a realistic alternative for the Soviet leadership. From the outset, the Soviet leadership (primarily Stalin himself) was interested in the destruction of the Versailles peace system. Consequently, its primary political priority was to facilitate a constellation in which the winners and losers of World War I would clash again, while the Soviet Union deliberately remained sidelined during the initial phase of the conflict. Following from this, the doctrine of "collective security" was merely a political fig leaf used to mask the steps by which the Soviet leadership supported the aggressors, Italy and Germany. Furthermore, there is no evidence that Stalin held a "bidding war" between the opposing sides, ultimately supporting whoever promised more. In reality, all his political moves in this regard pointed in one direction: the encouragement of the aggressor. This is clearly demonstrable from Soviet records concerning the remilitarization of the Rhineland, the Spanish Civil War, and the 1938 Czechoslovak crisis.
3. Due to the above, the question of responsibility for the outbreak of World War II requires revision. While

the Soviet Union's responsibility appears only marginally in the literature, newly uncovered documents—analyzed from a fresh perspective—make it clear that the responsibility for the war is, in fact, indivisible between Hitler and Stalin. Both were independently interested in the destruction of the European order, and thus their alliance was predestined from the start. However, this does not mean that both politicians thought alike on every key issue. While Hitler was essentially an irresponsible "va banque" gambler, Stalin weighed the consequences of his decisions much more thoroughly and, unlike Hitler, always sought to play a "safety game."

4. Claims that Stalin was unaware of the threat of German aggression prior to June 22, 1941, are also false. The Soviet dictator possessed almost all necessary information; however, by May 1941 at the latest, he found himself on a forced path (*path dependency*) as his options ran out. From the beginning, the Soviet army deployed troops at the border that were superior in both numbers and equipment to the German forces. Soviet military doctrine dealt extensively with questions regarding Germany, just not from a defensive standpoint. It is worth analyzing the forced trajectory Stalin maneuvered himself into, which had several stages: the first was November 1940, when a highly confident Stalin set conditions for Germany that would have drastically undermined the latter's strategic chances—not surprisingly, Hitler rejected

them. The second stage was the strengthening Anglo-American alliance, against which Hitler simply had no remaining options. Moreover, in the long run, it became obvious that Germany—dependent on a Soviet "umbilical cord" for raw materials—was destined to lose the arms race against these two powers. The third stage was triggered by Rudolf Hess's flight to England. Stalin could logically only conclude that an Anglo-German settlement was imminent, meaning he would become the next theater of war.

5. Claims interpreting Operation Barbarossa merely as a preventive strike are erroneous, as subjectively, Hitler did not fear an imminent Soviet attack. However, it is equally untrue that Hitler had other viable options regarding Operation Barbarossa. From the start, Germany would have been unable to wage war against the Western powers without Soviet economic assistance. Once the war stalled, his assumption was logical: Great Britain's willingness to make peace depended on what it could expect from the other two superpowers, the USA and the USSR. Additionally, due to Hitler's ideological considerations regarding "Lebensraum" in the East, he would have had to turn against the Soviet Union sooner or later regardless. The timing of this confrontation was determined by the fact that Molotov's November 1940 visit to Berlin made it clear to Nazi leaders that the Soviet Union was only willing to provide further wartime assistance at Germany's expense.