

History of World War II: Operation Barbarossa, the Allied Firebombing of German Cities and Japan's Early Conquests

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Operation Barbarossa

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by Shane Quinn

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HISTORY OF WORLD WAR II

**OPERATION BARBAROSSA. THE ALLIED FIREBOMBING
OF GERMAN CITIES AND JAPAN'S EARLY CONQUESTS**



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Preface

This book is entitled History of World War II: Operation Barbarossa, the Allied Firebombing of German Cities and Japan's Early Conquests.

The first two chapters focus on German preparations as they geared up to launch their 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union, called Operation Barbarossa, which began eight decades ago. It was named after King Frederick Barbarossa, a Prussian emperor who in the 12th century had waged war against the Slavic peoples. Analysed also in the opening two chapters are the Soviet Union's preparations for a conflict with Nazi Germany.

The remaining chapters focus for the large part on the fighting itself, as the Nazis and their Axis allies, the Romanians and Finns at first, swarmed across Soviet frontiers in the early hours of 22 June 1941. The German-led invasion of the USSR was the largest military offensive in history, consisting of almost four million invading troops. Its outcome would decide whether the post-World War II landscape comprised of an American-German dominated globe, or an American-Soviet dominated globe. The Nazi-Soviet war was, as a consequence, a crucial event in modern history and its result was felt for decades afterward and, indeed, to the present day.

Within the first four weeks of Operation Barbarossa, by mid-July 1941 the Germans had advanced more than two-thirds of the way to Moscow. Few outsiders would have given the Russians much of a chance at this point. However, the Soviet leadership did not panic, nor did the Red Army collapse as the French had done the year before.

The Nazi invasion was the most brutal the world had ever seen. In 1941 alone millions of Soviet citizens, both military personnel and non-combatants, would either be killed or sent to concentration camps. The murderous nature of the Nazi occupation led to increased resistance from the Soviet Army and local populations, many of whom came to despise the occupiers and joined partisan groups.

Covered here are some key aspects of Barbarossa from the German and Soviet viewpoints, such as intelligence reports warning of the coming German invasion, what impact the purges of the Soviet military command had on the Red Army, strategic errors committed by the Nazi hierarchy, German arrogance and underestimation of Russian fighting capacity and resources, vastness of the Soviet terrain and logistical problems. The German soldiers were led to believe that the Soviet Union was a primitive, technologically backward state, and the surprise was all the greater when they came across military hardware superior to their own,

like the Soviet T-34 and KV tanks.

The turning point of World War II is often regarded to be the Battle of Stalingrad, which began in August 1942; but the author argues that the really critical fighting and developments occurred a year before this, in the course of Barbarossa, which officially ended in German failure with the Red Army counterattack on 5 December 1941. The Soviets' ability to absorb and eventually overcome the Wehrmacht's blows saved humanity from the nightmare of a Nazi victory, in which case Adolf Hitler would have held dominance over much of Eurasia and perhaps further afield.

Part I

The Nazi-Soviet War

Chapter I

Operation Barbarossa. Did Stalin Foresee Hitler's Invasion?

In attacking eastwards from June 1941 the Nazis intended to annex the Ukraine, all of European Russia, the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, while establishing a satellite Finnish nation to the north-east. A greatly enlarged Germany would thus be created, serving as a homeland for hundreds of millions of those belonging to the so-called Germanic and Nordic races. As envisaged by Nazi planners, this expansion would provide the economic base to sustain the thousand year Reich.

According to Adolf Hitler's Directive No. 18 issued on 12 November 1940, the goal of his eastern invasion was to occupy and hold a line from Archangel, in the far north-west of Russia, to Astrakhan, almost 1,300 miles southward; further conquering Leningrad, Moscow, the Donbas, Kuban (in southern Russia) and the Caucasus.

Nothing was mentioned as to what the Germans would do, once the Archangel-Astrakhan line had been reached. The Wehrmacht's objective was, however, to annihilate the Soviet forces in western Russia through massive armoured spearheads and encirclements, thereby preventing the Red Army's withdrawal further east.

It should be stated, firstly, that the USSR had no plans in 1940 or 1941 to attack Nazi Germany; nor did the Soviets hold ambitions to sweep across all of mainland Europe in a war of conquest. There really was no need for the world's largest state to take control of other vast continents.

David Glantz, the US military historian and retired colonel, realised that Soviet ruler Joseph Stalin's position in 1941 was that of a *defensive* one. Glantz wrote how, "Stalin was guilty of wishful thinking, of hoping to delay war for at least another year, in order to complete the reorganization of his armed forces. He worked at a fever pitch throughout the spring of

1941, trying desperately to improve the Soviet Union's defensive posture while seeking to delay the inevitable confrontation". (1)

Glantz' views are supported by other experienced historians like England's Antony Beevor. He observed that "the Red Army was simply not in a state to launch a major offensive in the summer of 1941"; but Beevor did not entirely exclude the possibility that Stalin "may have been considering a preventive attack in the winter of 1941, or more probably in 1942, when the Red Army would be better trained and equipped". (2)

Was the Soviet leadership aware of the threat that Hitler posed to their state?; and which was gradually developing around them like a dark cloud. Early in July 1940 a report compiled by the Soviet intelligence agency, the NKGB, was sent to the Kremlin. It revealed that the Third Reich's General Staff had requested Germany's Transport Ministry to furnish details, regarding rail capacities for Wehrmacht soldiers to be shifted from west to east (3). It constituted the first hint of what lay ahead. This was the period, in the high summer of 1940, when serious discussions started between Hitler and his generals, relating to an attack on Russia.

As early as 31 July 1940 the German planning for an invasion of the Soviet Union "was in full swing", as noted by US author Harrison E. Salisbury (4). Earlier in July Hitler had initially pondered attacking Russia in the autumn of 1940 but, by late July, he concluded it was too late in the year with poor weather fast approaching.

There is little indication that Stalin, or high-ranking Soviet officials, were at all worried by the first warning signals they received through intelligence about Nazi intentions. During early August 1940, the British obtained information suggesting Hitler was planning to destroy Russia, and London passed on their findings to Moscow (5). Stalin ignored them as he strongly distrusted the British, not without some reason. This was based in part on Stalin's recent experiences in dealing with Conservative governments who were, to put it kindly, of an unfriendly disposition towards the Soviet Union.

London and Paris refused to sign a pact with the Kremlin in the spring and summer of 1939 - which would have aligned the British, French and Russians against Nazi Germany (6). Stalin had no choice but to then finalise an agreement with Hitler that autumn, and these unwanted realities have since been suppressed by institutions like the German-led European Union.

The Nazi-Soviet Pact of 23 August 1939 had served the Soviets well, until the Wehrmacht swiftly routed France from May to June 1940. The manner of the French defeat astonished and disturbed Stalin, who was expecting a long, drawn-out conflict in the west, as in the First World War.

Yet Stalin's agreement with Hitler had kept Russia out of the heavy fighting for now, while the Kremlin made territorial gains by taking over the eastern half of Poland, on 6 October 1939. With the end of the Winter War against Finland, the Soviets absorbed around 10% of Finnish land in March 1940. At the beginning of August 1940 Stalin officially annexed the Baltic nations of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, having first occupied those states in mid-June 1940, which resulted in pro-German officials fleeing the region (7). Stalin's march into the Baltic came as a response to the Nazi triumphs on the western front, and his understandable fear of Baltic nationalism and possible German penetration near Soviet frontiers.

Basil Liddell Hart, the retired British Army captain and military theorist wrote, "Hitler had agreed that the Baltic states should be within the Soviet Union's sphere of influence, not to their actual occupation; and he felt that he had been tricked by his partner; although most of his advisers realistically considered the Russian move into the Baltic states to be a natural precaution, inspired by fear of what Hitler might attempt after his victory in the west". (8)

During the days after the Fall of France, Stalin occupied the Romanian territories of Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia. Until World War I, Bessarabia had belonged to the Russian Empire for about a century, but Northern Bukovina never before comprised part of Russia. In the eyes of Hitler and German generals, Stalin's advance into parts of northern Romania was dangerous and provocative. Hitler first learnt of Stalin's plan to reincorporate Bessarabia on 23 June 1940, when just after sunrise the Nazi leader was victoriously touring Paris in an open topped vehicle (9). Hitler became irritated when he heard the news. He felt that Bessarabia's return to Russia would bring Stalin intolerably close to the Axis oil wells, at the city of Ploesti in southern Romania.

During a meeting with Benito Mussolini in the Bavarian Alps on 19 January 1941, Hitler told his Italian counterpart, "now in the age of airpower, the Romanian oil fields can be turned into an expanse of smoking debris by air attack from Russia and the Mediterranean, and the life of the Axis depends on these oil fields". (10)

Over the course of World War II, Ploesti's wells furnished the Nazi empire with at least 35% of its entire oil, other accounts state as much as 60%; but the latter figure is most likely excessive and above the overall average (11) (12). For many years Romania was Europe's largest oil producing country by far, and the fifth biggest on earth in 1941 and 1942, having overtaken Mexico. The significant oil sources in Indonesia (Dutch East Indies) fell under Axis control in early 1942, when that country was overrun by Japanese armies, and they would remain there for over three years.

Hitler wanted his Romanian oil fields to be formidably defended; he ordered the Wehrmacht to place scores of heavy and medium German anti-aircraft guns around the Ploesti refineries, and that smoke screens also be deployed; the latter were effective at obscuring the installations from enemy planes, which were shot down in large numbers.

The Germans created limited quantities of oil from synthetic hydrogenation processes, involving materials like coal. This mostly benefited the Luftwaffe, not so much the panzers and other ground vehicles. The terms of the non-aggression deal with Russia ensured the Reich received in total 900,000 tons of Soviet oil, from September 1939 to June 1941. This was not a huge amount, considering the Wehrmacht consumed three million tons of oil in 1940 alone. (13)

Nazi Germany was also supplied with oil by the United States, then unrivalled as the world's biggest oil producer and exporter; specifically the dealings that American corporations like Texaco and Standard Oil conducted with the Nazis, sometimes secretly through other countries, along with US-controlled subsidiaries based in the Reich (14). In addition, arriving from the globe's third largest oil manufacturing state, Venezuela, then a major US client, came shipments of petroleum sent across the Atlantic, destined for the German war machine.

Altogether "around 150 American companies" had "business links to Nazi Germany", the

Israeli journalist Ofer Aderet outlined, writing for the left-leaning newspaper Haaretz. US business deals with the Nazis, Aderet wrote, “included huge loans, large investments, cartel agreements, the construction of plants in Germany as part of the Third Reich’s rearmament, and the supply of massive amounts of war matériel. (15)

Meanwhile, Stalin’s reintegration of Bessarabia in early July 1940 was providing a buffer to the Soviet defence of its navy, in the Black Sea slightly further east; including added security to Russian naval bases, such as the port of Odessa in southern Ukraine. The Soviet advance into Romania “was worse than ‘a slap in the face’ for Hitler”, Liddell Hart observed as “it placed the Russians ominously close to the Romanian oil fields on which he counted for his own supply”. On 29 July 1940 Hitler spoke to his Chief-of-Operations, General Alfred Jodl, about the potential of fighting Russia if Stalin attempted to seize Ploesti. (16)

On 9 August 1940 General Jodl issued a directive titled “Reconstruction East”, ordering that German transport and supplies be bolstered in the east, so that plans would be cemented by the spring of 1941 for an attack on Russia (17). It was at this time that Winston Churchill’s government began warning Moscow of the German invasion plans; but Stalin strongly suspected that the British wanted to drag him into the war, just to take the pressure off London. Stalin certainly believed that Soviet armies would have to fight the Germans some day, but not just yet.

Soviet designs towards Germany remained non-threatening. On 1 August 1940 the Soviet Union’s foreign minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, said that the Nazi-Soviet Pact was centred not on “fortuitous considerations of a transient nature, but on the fundamental political interests of both countries” (18). Nevertheless by September 1940, Soviet commanders stationed along their western frontier began talking about Hitler’s “Drang nach Osten”, meaning the dictator’s proposal for eastward expansion. Soviet military men spoke about Hitler’s habit of carrying around a picture of Frederick Barbarossa, the red-bearded Prussian emperor who centuries before had waged war against the Slavs. (19)

On 12 November 1940 foreign minister Molotov, a staunch communist, landed in Germany by aircraft. Upon Molotov’s arrival in Berlin, Stalin told him to indicate to the Germans that he wanted a wide-ranging deal with them. Stalin still thought a partnership with Hitler into the near future was attainable. Instead, during the talks Nazi officials presented to Molotov a junior partnership for Soviet Russia, in a German-dominated global alliance. Soviet policy, as the Nazis insisted, was to be focused on south Asia, towards India, and a conflict with Britain. This did not satisfy Stalin at all.

Following Molotov’s dispatching of the report on his disappointing discussions in Berlin, according to Yakov Chadaev, a Soviet administrator, Stalin was certain that Hitler intended to wage war on Russia. Less than two weeks later, on 25 November 1940 Stalin informed the Bulgarian communist politician Georgi Dimitrov “our relations with Germany are polite on the surface, but there is serious friction between us”. (20)

Marshal Aleksandr Vasilevsky, a top level Russian officer who repeatedly met with Stalin, had accompanied Molotov to Berlin. Vasilevsky returned home convinced that Hitler would invade the Soviet Union (21). Vasilevsky’s opinion was shared by many of his Red Army colleagues. After Molotov had left Berlin, Hitler met German executives and made it clear to them that he was going to attack Russia.

In the autumn of 1940 draft plans for the strategic positioning of Soviet divisions along their

western frontier, in preparation for a German invasion, were sent to the Kremlin by the Russian High Command. Stalin did not respond. Rather ominously, in the second half of November 1940 the central European countries of Hungary, Slovakia and Romania all joined Hitler's new European order, by signing up to the Axis coalition. Hitler could now depend especially on the support of Romania, under Ion Antonescu. He was a fervently anti-communist and anti-Semitic military dictator, who at age 58 had come to power on 4 September 1940.

Romania is by no means a leading nation today, but during the war years it was indeed an important country. This was mostly due to her natural resources and to a lesser extent its strategic location, beside the Black Sea and the Ukraine.

Stalin was growing slightly concerned as 1940 reached its end. Addressing Soviet generals before Christmas, Stalin referenced passages from Hitler's book 'Mein Kampf', and he spoke of the Nazi leader's stated goal of attacking the USSR some day. Stalin said "we will try to delay the war for two years", until December 1942 or into 1943. Shortly after the Wehrmacht's crushing of the French, Molotov recalled him saying, "we would be able to confront the Germans on an equal basis only by 1943". (22)

On 18 December 1940 Hitler released his Directive No. 21 outlining, "The German armed forces must be prepared to crush Soviet Russia in a quick campaign, before the end of the war against England". On Christmas Day 1940, the Soviet military attaché *in Berlin received an anonymous letter. It expounded that the Germans were preparing a military operation against Russia, for the spring of 1941.* (23)

By 29 December 1940 Soviet intelligence agencies had possession of the basic facts regarding Operation Barbarossa, its design and planned start date (24). In late January 1941 the Japanese military diplomat Yamaguchi, returning to the Russian capital from Berlin, said to a member of the Soviet naval diplomatic service, "I do not exclude the possibility of conflict between Berlin and Moscow".

Yamaguchi's remark was forwarded on 30 January 1941 to Marshal Kliment Voroshilov, a prominent Soviet officer who knew Stalin personally. Even before late January 1941, the Soviet Defence Commissariat was concerned enough to draft a general directive to the Russian border commands and fleets, which for the first time would name Germany as the probable enemy in coming war.

In early February 1941, the Soviet Naval Commissariat started receiving almost daily accounts, about the arrival of German Army specialists in Bulgarian ports; and preparations for the installment of German coastal armaments there. This information was relayed to Stalin on 7 February 1941. In fact, other senior figures such as Marshal Filipp Golikov, the chief of intelligence for the USSR's General Staff, said that all Soviet reports on German planning were forwarded to Stalin himself. (25)

As Molotov was about to make his way to Berlin the previous November, Stalin stressed to him that Bulgaria is "the most important question of the negotiations" and should be placed in the Soviet realm (26). On 1 March 1941 Bulgaria instead joined the Axis. In early February 1941, the Russian command in Leningrad reported German troop movements in Finland. This was no laughing matter as Finland shares an eastern border with Russia.

The Kremlin could not count on Finnish loyalty in the event of a German attack. Finland's

Commander-in-Chief Gustaf Mannerheim, in his mid-70s and an anti-Bolshevik, had been closely acquainted with the deposed Russian Tsar Nicholas II. Mannerheim previously kept a portrait of the Tsar and said, "He was my emperor". The Finns were far from grateful when the Soviet military rolled into their country in November 1939, without a declaration of war. In February 1941 the Leningrad Command reported German conversations with Sweden, pertaining to the transit of Wehrmacht troops through Swedish land.

The Soviet political administration wanted to emphasize awareness to the Red Army, to be prepared for engagement. Stalin rejected this approach, because he was afraid it would appear to Hitler that he was gathering forces to start an offensive against Germany. Stalin warned General Georgy Zhukov that "Mobilisation means war", and he did not want to risk a conflict with Germany in 1941. (27)

On 15 February 1941, a German typist entered the Soviet consulate in Berlin. He brought with him a German-Russian phrase book, which was being published in his printing shop in extra large edition – included in it were such phrases as, "Are you a Communist?", "Hands up or I'll shoot" and "Surrender" (28). The ramifications were clear enough. Around this time, Russian State Security acquired reliable intelligence stating that the German invasion of Britain was suspended indefinitely, until Russia was defeated.

In late February and early March 1941, German reconnaissance flights were taking place over the Baltic states under Russian control. These were severe infringements into the Soviet zone. The appearance of Nazi planes became frequent over the coastal city of Libau, in western Latvia, above the Estonian capital Tallinn, and over Estonia's largest island Saaremaa.

Russian Admiral Nikolai Kuznetsov, who intensely disliked the fascist states, granted the Soviet Baltic fleet authority to open fire on German aircraft. On 17 and 18 March 1941, Luftwaffe planes were spotted over Libau and promptly shot at by Soviet personnel (29). Nazi aircraft were then sighted near the city of Odessa, on the Black Sea. Admiral Kuznetsov was summoned to the Kremlin by Stalin, where he found him with the police chief Lavrentiy Beria. Stalin reprimanded Kuznetsov for giving the order to shoot at German planes, and he expressly forbid Soviet units to do so again.

Notes

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Chapter II

Hitler's Secret Directive 18

After the failed November 1940 discussions in Berlin, of the Soviet Union's foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov, both he and his leader Joseph Stalin occasionally remarked that Nazi Germany was no longer so prompt in fulfilling its obligations to Moscow. This was relating to the German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact, of 23 August 1939, an agreement which was meant to last for 10 years. Stalin and Molotov did not attribute much significance to the slacking off in Berlin's punctuality, as the delivery of German goods and technology to Soviet Russia increasingly did not appear on schedule.

Unknown to Stalin and Molotov, on the very day the Soviet foreign minister had landed in Berlin for talks, 12 November 1940, Adolf Hitler secretly issued Directive No. 18. It outlined the planned German invasion of the USSR, including the envisaged conquest of major cities like Kiev, Kharkov, Leningrad and Moscow. On 18 December 1940 Führer Directive No. 21 was completed, which stated that the Wehrmacht's attack on the Soviet Union should proceed in mid-May 1941.

For Russia, as 1941 advanced beyond its opening weeks, the warning signs about the German threat were becoming difficult to overlook. False reports were featured in the Nazi press about "military preparations" being made across the border in the Soviet camp. The same German media tactics had preceded Hitler's invasions of Czechoslovakia and Poland.

On 23 February 1941, the Soviet Defence Commissariat published a decree stating that Nazi Germany was the next likely enemy (1). Soviet frontier areas were requested to make the necessary preparations to repel the attack, but the Kremlin did not respond.

On 22 March 1941, the Russian intelligence agency NKGB obtained what it believed to be solid material that "Hitler has given secret instructions to suspend the fulfillment of orders for the Soviet Union", regarding shipments tied to the Nazi-Soviet Pact. For example the Czech Skoda plant, under Nazi control, had been ordered to halt deliveries to Russia. On 25 March 1941 the NKGB produced a special report, expounding that the Germans had amassed 120 divisions beside the Soviet border. (2)

For months there were concerning cables coming from the Russian military attaché in Nazi-occupied France, General Ivan Susloparov. The German authorities had curtailed Soviet embassy duties in France, and in February 1941 the Russian embassy was moved from Paris southwards to Vichy, in central France. Only a Soviet consulate was left in Paris.

Image on the right: OKH commander Field Marshal Walther von Brauchitsch and Hitler study maps during the early days of Hitler's Russian Campaign (Public Domain)



During April 1941, General Susloparov informed Moscow that the Germans would attack Russia in late May 1941. Slightly later on, he explained it had been delayed for a month due to bad weather. At the end of April, General Susloparov collected further information about the German invasion through colleagues from Yugoslavia, America, China, Turkey and Bulgaria (3). This intelligence was forwarded to Moscow by mid-May 1941.

Again in April 1941, a Czech agent reported that the Wehrmacht was going to execute military operations against the Soviet Union. The report was sent to Stalin, who became angry when he read it and replied, "This informant is an English provocateur. Find out who is making this provocation and punish him". (4)

On 10 April 1941 Stalin and Molotov were given a summary by the NKGB, about a meeting that Hitler had with Prince Paul of Yugoslavia at the Berghof, in early March 1941 (5). Hitler was described as telling Prince Paul he would begin his invasion of Russia in late June 1941. Stalin's response to the alarming reports, such as this, was one of appeasement of Hitler, though a similar strategy had failed for the Western powers.

Remarkably, through April 1941 Stalin increased the volume of shipments of Russian supplies to the Third Reich, amounting to: 208,000 tons of grain, 90,000 tons of oil, 6,340 tons of metal, etc (6). Much of these essentials would be used by the Nazis in their attack on Russia.

Marshal Filipp Golikov, head of intelligence for the USSR's General Staff, insisted that all Soviet reports relating to Nazi plans were forwarded directly to Stalin. Other accounts informing Moscow about an impending Wehrmacht invasion came from abroad too. As early as January 1941 Sumner Welles, an influential US government official, warned the Soviet Ambassador to America, Konstantin Umansky, that Washington had information showing Germany would engage in war against Russia, by the spring of 1941. (7)

During the final week of March 1941 US Army cryptanalysts, experts at deciphering codes, started producing obvious indications of a German relocation to the east. This material was relayed to the Soviets (8). America's cryptographers had cracked Japanese codes in the second half of 1940; including the Purple Cipher, Japan's highest diplomatic code, which ensured that the Franklin Roosevelt government was uniquely well informed of Tokyo's intentions.

The US commercial attaché in Berlin, Sam E. Woods, came into contact with high-level German staff officers opposed to the Nazi regime. They were aware of the planning for Operation Barbarossa. Woods was in a position to discreetly observe the German preparations from July 1940, until December of that year. Woods sent his findings to Washington. President Roosevelt agreed that the Kremlin should be told of these developments. On 20 March 1941, Welles once more saw Soviet Ambassador Umansky and forwarded the news. (9)

Russia's embassy in Berlin noticed that the Nazi press was reprinting passages from Hitler's 1925 book 'Mein Kampf'. The paragraphs in question were about his proposal for "lebensraum", German enlargement at the Soviet Union's expense.

Image below: German troops at the Soviet state border marker, 22 June 1941 (Public Domain)



The Russians had a formidable espionage agent, Richard Sorge, operating in Tokyo since 1933, the year that Hitler took power in Germany. Sorge, a German citizen and committed communist, established an especially close relationship with the imprudent Nazi ambassador to Japan, General Eugen Ott. The data Sorge received was not always 100% accurate, but it allowed him access to the most confidential and up to date German plans.

On 5 March 1941, Sorge dispatched to the Soviets a microfilm of a German telegram sent by the foreign minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, to the German ambassador Ott – and which outlined that the Wehrmacht attack on Russia would fall in mid-June 1941. On 15 May, Sorge reported to Moscow that the German invasion would start somewhere between 20 to 22 of June (10). A few days later on 19 May Sorge cabled, "Against the Soviet Union will be concentrated nine armies, 150 divisions". He later increased this figure to between 170 to 190 divisions, and that Operation Barbarossa will start without an ultimatum or declaration of war.

All of this fell on deaf ears. Sorge, who had his vices being a heavy drinker and womaniser, was ridiculed by Stalin just before the Germans attacked as someone "who has set up factories and brothels in Japan". To be fair to Stalin, at the late date of 17 June 1941 Sorge was not fully certain if Barbarossa would go ahead (11). Why? The German military attaché

in Tokyo became unsure if it would proceed, and sometimes a spy is only as good as his or her sources.

Meanwhile in March 1941, Russia's State Security forces acquired an account about a meeting the Romanian autocrat, Ion Antonescu, had with a German official named Bering, where the subject of war with Russia was discussed. Antonescu had in fact been informed by Hitler, as early as 14 January 1941, of the German plan to invade Russia, such was the prominent position Romania held in Nazi war aims. The German-controlled Ploesti refineries in southern Romania produced 5.5 million tons of oil in 1941, and 5.7 million tons in 1942. (12)

Italian dictator Benito Mussolini learnt of the German attack on Russia only after it had commenced – in part because Hitler believed he did not really need Italy, he had not asked for their help; and it was also hardly Italy's fight, considering that country's position cut adrift somewhat in south-central Europe. The Italian people, furthermore, would not want their troops involved in a brutal conflict against Russia, and which had nothing to do with Italy. The Duce had other ideas, and after the war the Austrian commando Otto Skorzeny correctly wrote, "Benito Mussolini was not a good wartime leader". (13)

By mid-March 1941, the Soviet leadership had a detailed description of the Barbarossa plan (14). The period, throughout March and early April 1941, saw tensions rise significantly between Berlin and Moscow, notably in south-eastern Europe. The American author Harrison E. Salisbury noted, "This was the moment in which Yugoslavia with tacit encouragement from Moscow defied the Germans, and in which the Germans moved rapidly and decisively to end the war in Greece, and occupy the whole of the Balkans. When Moscow signed a treaty with Yugoslavia on April 6 – the day Hitler attacked Belgrade – the German reaction was so savage that Stalin became alarmed". (15)

On 25 March 1941 the Yugoslav government of the regent, Prince Paul, had signed an agreement in Vienna, which effectively made Yugoslavia a Nazi client state. Nevertheless, just two days later patriotic factions in the Serbian populace, assisted by British agents and led by chief of the Yugoslav air force, General Dusan Simovic, overthrew the pro-German regency. They installed a monarchy headed by the teenage king, Peter II of Yugoslavia; and a new government was formed in the capital Belgrade which declared its neutrality. Upon hearing this, Winston Churchill declared it to be "great news" and that Yugoslavia had "found its soul" while it would receive from London "all possible aid and succour". (16)

Hitler was irate at Churchill's gloating and the sudden reversal in Yugoslav policy. Feeling he had been betrayed somehow, he decided to teach the Yugoslavs a lesson. Hitler ordered his Luftwaffe chief Hermann Göring to launch a furious air attack on Belgrade. In the days from 6 April 1941, thousands of people were killed in Belgrade from Nazi air raids. On the ground Yugoslav forces were no match for the Germans, who were helped by the Italians, and the fighting was all over after less than two weeks. Churchill's aid and succour was sadly not forthcoming.

The Nazi-led Axis powers likewise invaded Greece on 6 April 1941, and by the middle of that month the Greek position had become untenable (17); therefore on 24 April British forces in Greece began their evacuation of the country. This was an operation the British had by now developed a real expertise in, as to escape the German blows they previously evacuated Dunkirk, Le Havre and Narvik.

Because of his subjugation of Yugoslavia and Greece, Hitler on 30 April 1941 postponed the attack on the Soviet Union until 22 June. It has sometimes been claimed that this delay, of just over five weeks, was a central factor in later derailing Barbarossa. Though an attractive one, this theory does not stand up under closer inspection.

The Nazi invasion eventually petered out, but largely due to strategic errors committed by the German high command and Hitler, such as not directing the majority of their forces towards Moscow, the USSR's communications centre. Moreover, Canadian historian Donald J. Goodspeed observed, "the middle of May was really too early for an invasion of Russia. Before the middle of June, late spring rains would ruin the roads, flood the rivers, and make movement very difficult except on the few paved highways. Thus, since the initial surprise thrust had to go rapidly to yield the best results, Hitler probably gained more than he lost by his postponement". (18)

The spring and early summer of 1941 were particularly wet, across eastern Poland and the western parts of European Russia. Had the Germans invaded as originally intended on 15 May 1941, their advance would have bogged down in the first weeks. It is interesting to note that the Polish-Russian river valleys were still overflowing on 1 June, according to the American historian Samuel W. Mitcham. (19)

On 3 April 1941 Churchill attempted to warn Stalin, through the British ambassador to Russia, Stafford Cripps, that London's intelligence data indicated the Germans were preparing an attack on Russia. Stalin gave no credence whatever to British intelligence reports, because he was distrustful of Britain even more so than America, and it is likely such warnings if anything increased his suspicions further.

In late April 1941 Jefferson Patterson, the First Secretary of the US Embassy in Berlin, invited his Russian counterpart Valentin Berezhkov to cocktails at his home. Among the invitees was a Luftwaffe major, apparently on leave from North Africa. Late in the evening this German major confided to Berezhkov, "The fact is I'm not here on leave. My squadron was recalled from North Africa, and yesterday we got orders to transfer to the east, to the region of Lodz [central Poland]. There may be nothing special in that, but I know many other units have also been transferred to your frontiers recently" (20). Berezhkov was disturbed to hear this, and never before had a Wehrmacht officer divulged top secret news like that. Berezhkov passed on what he heard to Moscow.

Throughout April 1941, daily bulletins from the Soviet General Staff and Naval Staff outlined German troop gatherings along the Russian frontier. On 1 May an account from the General Staff to the Soviet border military districts stated, "In the course of all March and April... the German command has carried out an accelerated transfer of troops to the borders of the Soviet Union". Try as the Germans might, it was impossible for them to conceal the gathering of vast numbers of their soldiers. The German presence was obvious along the central River Bug boundary; the Soviet chief of frontier guards asked Moscow for approval to relocate the families of Red Army troops further east. Permission was not granted and the commander was upbraided for showing "panic". (21)

Nazi reconnaissance flights, near or over Soviet territory, were increasing as the spring of 1941 continued. Between 28 March and 18 April, the Russians said that German planes had been sighted 80 times making incursions. On 15 April, a German aircraft was forced into an emergency landing near the city of Rovno, in western Ukraine. On board a camera was found, along with exposed film and a map of the USSR (22). The German chargé d'affaires in

Moscow, Werner von Tippleskirch, was summoned to the Foreign Commissariat on 22 April 1941. He met stiff protestations about the German overflights.

Yet Nazi planes were hardly ever shot at, because Stalin forbade the Soviet armed forces from doing so, for fear of provoking an invasion. In early May 1941 the German propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels wrote in his diary, "Stalin and his people remain completely inactive. Like a rabbit confronted by a snake". (23)

On 5 May 1941 Stalin received from his intelligence agencies a report detailing, "German officers and soldiers speak openly of the coming war, between Germany and the Soviet Union, as a matter already decided. The war is expected to start after the completion of spring planting". Also on 5 May Stalin gave a speech to young Soviet officers at the Kremlin, and he spoke seriously of the Nazi threat. "War with Germany is inevitable" Stalin said, but there is no sign the Soviet ruler believed a German attack was imminent. (24)

On 24 May 1941, the head of the German western press department, Karl Bemer, got drunk at a reception in the Bulgarian embassy in Berlin. Bemer was heard roaring "we will be boss of all Russia and Stalin will be dead. We will demolish the Russians quicker than we did the French" (25). This incident quickly came to the attention of Ivan Filippov, a Russian correspondent in Berlin working for the TASS news agency. Filippov, also a Soviet intelligence operative, heard that Bemer was thereafter arrested by German police.

In early June 1941 Admiral Mikhail Vorontsov, the Russian naval attaché in Berlin, telegraphed his fellow Admiral Nikolai Kuznetsov, who was in Moscow, and stated that the Germans would invade around the 20th to the 22nd of June. Kuznetsov checked to see if Stalin was given a copy of this telegram, and he found that he certainly received it. (26)

Notes

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Chapter III

Nazi Germany's Economic Exploitation of the USSR

Looking back over an eight decade timespan at the design for Operation Barbarossa, the June 1941 German-led attack on the USSR, its invasion plan betrays a pathological overconfidence. The strategic planning, of advancing across a breadth of many hundreds of miles of terrain, was excessively ambitious to the point of being grotesque.

Barbarossa's intelligence details were also poorly worked out. Nazi estimates on Soviet military capacity were based more on guesswork than reliable information, and this underestimation of the enemy would come back to haunt them.

On 13 May 1941 in preparation for the invasion, Adolf Hitler's close colleague Field Marshal

Wilhelm Keitel issued an order outlining that, upon capture, all Soviet commissars were to be executed immediately. The commissars were Communist Party officials attached to military units, in order to imbue Red Army troops with Bolshevik principles and loyalty to the Soviet state.

It was because of this that Hitler designated the commissars to be liquidated in their thousands. The order signed, on 13 May, continued that Soviet civilians suspected of committing offences against the Wehrmacht could be shot, on the request of any German officer. Most maliciously of all, it was made clear that German soldiers found perpetrating crimes against non-combatants need not be prosecuted.

Those Wehrmacht officers that did not believe in Nazism, i.e. because they were monarchists or conservatives, could still reprimand German troops for misdeeds if they wished to, and this did occur. One of the most prominent German Army commanders in the early 1940s, Field Marshal Fedor von Bock leading Army Group Center, was an avowed monarchist who disliked Nazism.

The Jewish Virtual Library, overseen by American foreign policy analyst Mitchell Bard, acknowledged that von Bock “privately expressed outrage at the atrocities” committed by SS killing squads on the Eastern front; but the field marshal was “unwilling to take the matter directly to Hitler” though he did send “one of his subordinate officers to lodge the complaint”. The Jewish Virtual Library noted that the crimes committed against Soviet civilians further “outraged many of von Bock’s subordinate officers”.

This is not to suggest the Wehrmacht, as a whole, was clean in its conduct in the Soviet Union and elsewhere. It was by no means that, which came primarily as a result of staunch Nazis being placed in positions of authority in the German Army; like the Chief-of-Staff Franz Halder and Field Marshal Walter von Reichenau, commander of the German 6th Army.

Among the invasion’s goals was flagrant exploitation, looting and annexation. With this in mind, the Nazis established the Economic Office East, which was placed under the authority of Reichsmarshall Hermann Goering, the second most powerful man in the Third Reich. Goering informed Benito Mussolini’s son-in-law, Count Galeazzo Ciano, that “This year [1941] between 20 and 30 million persons will die in Russia of hunger. Perhaps it is well that it should be so, for certain nations must be decimated. But even if it were not, nothing can be done about it”. Count Ciano, who was the Italian Foreign Minister since 1936, passed on Goering’s comments to Mussolini.

More than three weeks after the German attack, Goering wrote on 15 July 1941, “Use of the occupied territories should be made primarily in the food and oil sectors of the economy. Get to Germany as much food and oil as possible – that is the main economic goal of the campaign”.

It is still not entirely clear whether the Nazi method of systematizing the plunder and administering the occupied territories (known as Plan Oldenburg) was based on the belief that the Reich required this amount of foodstuffs, with the deaths of millions of Russians and Jews from starvation being a side effect; or whether their desire was the depopulation of the conquered regions, with starvation used as a convenient process for mass murder. Whatever the principal motive, the prospects of Soviet citizens unfortunate enough to fall under Nazi occupation was grim.

The German march onto Russian soil was hardly a new historical occurrence. A generation before, the eastern divisions of the Imperial German Army, commanded by Erich Ludendorff and Paul von Hindenburg, had from late 1914 captured chunks of the Russian Empire's territory; which on that occasion came after the Imperial Russian Army had marched into East Prussia.

German eastern expansion under Ludendorff and Hindenburg was concerned too with conquest, but theirs was more humane than Nazi policy, as it did not descend to the widespread killing of civilians or Jewish populations. Instead, Ludendorff and Hindenburg sought to commandeer livestock and horses, while exploiting "the extensive agricultural and forestry resources for the German war effort", historians Jens Thiel and Christian Westerhoff observed.

Hitler's East Prussian gauleiter Erich Koch, who would be in charge of ruling Nazi-occupied Ukraine, said that, "Our task is to suck from the Ukraine all the goods we can get hold of, without consideration of the feeling or the property of the Ukrainians. Gentlemen: I am expecting from you the utmost severity toward the native population".

The 1941 German invasion force consisted of 136 divisions, which amounted to 3 million men. They were supported at the beginning by over half a million Finnish and Romanian troops, commanded by Gustaf Mannerheim and Ion Antonescu, two experienced career officers who for differing reasons desired the USSR's destruction. Field Marshal Mannerheim of Finland, a monarchist and more moderate figure than General Antonescu, had never forgiven the Bolsheviks for shooting Tsar Nicholas II and his family on 17 July 1918; Mannerheim wept bitterly when he heard of the Tsar's death, for he was both well acquainted with the Russian monarch and had served under him in the Imperial Russian Army.

Of the 136 Wehrmacht divisions which would attack the USSR on 22 June 1941, a modest 19 of them were panzer divisions and 14 comprised of motor divisions. In all, about 600,000 German motor vehicles would roll to the east, but the Germans deployed up to 750,000 horses in the invasion. It demonstrates that the Wehrmacht was not the ultra-modern, motorized army that Nazi propaganda insisted it was.

Facing the Germans across the border, in the western USSR, were three very large Soviet Army Groups, comprising of 193 equivalent divisions. Fifty-four of these were tank or motor divisions, significantly more than the Germans had. Since 1932, Joseph Stalin spent huge sums in equipping the military with motorized machines and heavy armor. In particular, the Russians possessed a far greater number of tanks than the enemy; but the experience and quality of Soviet tank crews was noticeably inferior to the Germans, who were battle-hardened and well-versed in the Blitzkrieg (Lightning War) style of combat.

There were other serious Russian weaknesses. Stalin's purge of the Red Army high command from May 1937 "affected the development of our armed forces and their combat preparedness", Marshal Georgy Zhukov wrote, the most lauded Russian commander of the 20th century. The purges, though they targeted a minority of the entire Soviet military corps, had inflicted "enormous damage" on "the top echelons of the army command" Zhukov stated. It meant that paralysis was endemic in the Red Army's decision-making apparatus, which would have serious implications around the time of the German invasion.

Hitler's calculations for attacking the USSR were audacious, to put it mildly. The Fuehrer

expected to overthrow Stalin's Russia in about 8 weeks, and once that was accomplished, he intended to turn back and finish off Britain. Hitler estimated that he would not really be embroiled in a two-front war and, in this he was right, for now. The British were in no position in 1941 to interfere with the Nazi plan for eastward enlargement.

The German offensive was indeed to be launched across a massive front, but the Schwerpunkt – the heaviest point of the German blow – was to land north of the Pripyet Marshes in Soviet Belarus. Here, two formidable forces, Army Group North led by Field Marshal Ritter von Leeb, and Army Group Center led by Field Marshal von Bock, would implement a giant pincers movement against the Soviet armies opposing them. They would then as envisaged continue advancing and take the capital city, Moscow, European Russia's communications hub. This indicates that Hitler had originally assigned Moscow as a primary objective.

Von Leeb's Army Group North comprised of the German 16th Army (commanded by Ernst Busch) and the 18th Army (Georg von Kuechler), supported by four panzer divisions under Colonel-General Erich Hoepner.

Army Group Center was, by some distance, the biggest of the three Army Groups which attacked the USSR. It consisted of the German 2nd Army (Maximilian von Weichs), the 4th Army (Günther von Kluge) and the 9th Army (Adolf Strauss), bolstered by two armored groups totaling 10 panzer divisions and commanded by Generals Heinz Guderian and Hermann Hoth.

Gerd von Rundstedt's Army Group South was made up of the German 6th Army (Walter von Reichenau), the 17th Army (Carl-Heinrich von Stülpnagel), a German-Romanian Army (Eugen Ritter von Schobert), and supported by four panzer divisions under Colonel-General Ewald von Kleist. Von Rundstedt's Army Group was designated to advance south of the Pripyet Marshes.

In doing so, von Rundstedt was expected to move rapidly in conquering eastern Poland and, specifically, to capture the ancient Polish city of Lublin, close to the Ukrainian border. This would provide a launching pad for Army Group South's panzers to thrust into the Ukraine, and take its capital Kiev, the Soviet Union's third largest city with 930,000 inhabitants. Thereafter, von Rundstedt's divisions would be requested to occupy all of the Ukraine, with Hitler wanting that country's resources for pillaging, such as wheat, for it to become "the breadbasket of the Reich", as he put it.

While Hitler gathered his 136 divisions along the Nazi-Soviet frontier, he left 46 divisions behind to guard the rest of mainland Europe. That number does seem excessive and many of those German formations would be left idle. Military historian Donald J. Goodspeed wrote, "Certainly far fewer than 46 divisions could have countered any British initiative on the continent, a possibility that was in any case unlikely".

Although the Soviet Army proved much larger than the Nazis thought, it was unprepared for the attack that was to come. A considerable proportion of the Red Army in June 1941 was positioned too close to the Nazi-Soviet boundary which, since 1939, had been extended across Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and Romania.

The Stalin Line, a series of fortifications constructed from the late 1920s, and which guarded the western USSR's pre-1939 frontiers, had merely been partially dismantled. The new

forward defense positions were incomplete by mid-1941. The Soviet military's armored formations had also been broken up, and the tanks allotted to infantry divisions. The latter error was corrected by Stalin as he repositioned the armored divisions, but they were still in the process of entering full working order when the Germans attacked.

Furthermore, Stalin and the Red Army high command believed the focal point of the German assault would fall south of the Pripet Marshes – that is through the Ukraine – whereas the Germans would, as mentioned, strike most heavily north of the Pripet Marshes across Soviet Belarus. The Russian defenses were placed at their strongest in the wrong sector of the front. This misjudgment in part enabled Army Group Center to advance rapidly into the heart of Belarus, where the Red Army was not fortified so strongly.

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Chapter IV

Why Nazi Germany Failed to Defeat the Soviet Union

As the First World War was erupting from late summer 1914, the great majority of political leaders believed it would be of short duration.

Only the rare far-sighted individual knew what was coming, such as Herbert Kitchener, Britain's Secretary of War. At one of the first British Cabinet conferences at the conflict's outset, Kitchener predicted the fighting would rumble on for three years, and that Britain would eventually be required to deploy its full resources (1). His estimation of a three-year war was shy of just one year.

Edward Grey, the British Foreign Secretary, recalled that Kitchener's prediction had "seemed to most of us unlikely, if not incredible" (2). On 8 August 1914 Winston Churchill, the First Lord of the Admiralty, estimated that the war would last for nine months, which was longer than many thought.

Kitchener's colleagues failed to realise, such was mankind's advancements in technology by the early 20th century – about 150 years after the Industrial Revolution had begun in Britain around 1760 – that a war between the great powers would most likely be lengthy, and a slaughter of unprecedented proportions could only ensue. After the bloodletting finally stopped on 11 November 1918, realistic analysts like Vladimir Lenin stated that the waging of war was "a survival from the bourgeois world"; while the German commander Hans von Seeckt said "war was no longer an intelligent way to conduct a nation's policy". (3)

The rise to power in Italy and Germany of fervent warmongers, Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler, was a near guarantee that another large-scale conflict was in the offing.

Both Mussolini and Hitler's taking of power, in 1922 and 1933 respectively, was assisted massively by the social upheaval and destabilisation induced as a result of World War I.



Neville Chamberlain, Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini Meet in 1938

The weak-willed response of the western democracies to Nazi enlargement from the mid-1930s, particularly the timid French reaction, emboldened Hitler on the path to war. British professor Evan Mawdsley, who specialises in Russian history, wrote of the Third Reich's position by 1941 that "invading Russia was not *the* fatal mistake of Nazi Germany. After all, what was Hitler's alternative? *Not* to invade Russia? Inaction would have allowed Germany's enemies to become stronger, and would have left Germany economically dependent on Russia. The lethal mistake had been made earlier, when Hitler's adventures in Czechoslovakia and Poland led Germany into a general war". (4)

The fighting initially went as well as the Wehrmacht could have hoped for; they routed Poland in September 1939 and then scored further routine victories in Scandinavia and across western Europe, during the spring and summer of 1940. The principal opposing force, the French Army, had been decaying ever since 1917. That year mutinies spread to no less than 54 French divisions by 9 June 1917. Even in those formations where no mutinies occurred, over 50% of French soldiers returning from leave reported back drunk (5). These amazing occurrences were hushed up as best they could by the French military command, and the silence needlessly continued long afterwards.

Canadian historian Donald J. Goodspeed explained,

"Shame and pride are bad counselors, and the causes of the catastrophe in French morale that occurred in 1917 were never brought out into full daylight, where they could have been analysed and perhaps cured. That no real cure was effected, the debacle of 1940 conclusively proved". (6)

The Nazis now turned their attention to the main target of their imperialist foreign policy: the Soviet Union, which Hitler had envisaged conquering for many years. Hitler was given encouragement by the Soviet Army's underwhelming performance, in the 1939-1940 Winter War against Finland, with its population of around 4 million.

Yet as the Finns' leading commander Gustaf Mannerheim fairly concluded, the Soviets learnt lessons from their opening military shortcomings on Finnish soil, and their performance "slowly improved" as the weeks elapsed (7). The gradual uptake in Russia's military display here was unknown to the few German military observers, who had accompanied the Red Army on their Finnish incursion. The Germans were left unimpressed by the first Soviet raids, before departing homeward early.

The Wehrmacht meanwhile enjoyed more swift triumphs, over Yugoslavia and Greece in April 1941, which only emboldened Hitler further. The German conquest of Yugoslavia and Greece compelled Hitler to postpone his invasion of the USSR by 38 days. This delay is often purported to be a crucial reason, in the Nazis' failure to capture Moscow and overthrow the Soviet Union.

American military historian Samuel W. Mitcham, who focuses largely on the Nazi regime, revealed otherwise as "the spring rains in eastern Poland and the western sections of European Russia came late in 1941, and were much heavier than usual. Many of the Polish-Russian river valleys (including the Bug) were still flooded as late as June 1; therefore, the invasion of the Soviet Union could not have begun until after that". (8)

The ground in the western USSR had dried out by 22 June 1941. It was ideal for the panzers, half-tracks, and so on to move with ease. In addition, for weeks Joseph Stalin had refused to believe the swell of intelligence accounts he received in person from his own agencies, and from abroad, warning of a coming German attack.

Lt. Col. Goodspeed wrote,

"The reports from Soviet intelligence were the most plausible, accurate and detailed of all; and they displayed a remarkable convergence, which should have augmented their credibility. Victor Sukolov, the head of the Rote Kopelle [Red Orchestra] in Brussels, Rudolph Rössler in Switzerland, Leopold Trepper in Paris, and Dr. Richard Sorge in Tokyo all informed Stalin of Barbarossa". (9)

The Kremlin was clearly not expecting the German invasion to fall in the summer of 1941. Marshal Nikolay Voronov, a top level Russian commander in charge of the Red Army's artillery forces, and a future Hero of the Soviet Union, remembered on the eve of Hitler's attack, "I did not know in that time whether we had any kind of operative-strategic plan, in case of war. I only knew that the plan for artillery and combat artillery tactics had not yet been approved, although the first draft had been worked out in 1938". (10)



Further evidence of the lack of Russian preparedness was seen when, in the opening phase of the invasion, large numbers of Soviet airplanes were destroyed by the Germans, much of them on the ground. Air units of the Soviet Western Military District lost 740 of its 1,540 aircraft (a 48% loss) on the first day alone of the German attack (11); its local commander, General Ivan Kopets, viewed the destruction with despair and shot himself on 23 June 1941.

The ruin of the Soviet Air Force was even worse in the Baltic Military District. During the first three days of Operation Barbarossa, 920 Soviet aircraft out of a total of 1,080 were destroyed in the Baltic region, an 85% loss (12). Furthermore, many undamaged and repairable Russian planes had to be abandoned, as the Germans and their Axis allies (mainly Romanians and Finns at first) swarmed over Soviet terrain. By the first week of July 1941, the Soviets had lost almost 4,000 aircraft, while the Luftwaffe was shorn of just 550 of its planes at that point. (13)



Stalin had been awoken by his security chief, Nikolai Vlasik, in the early hours of 22 June 1941, and he was told of heavy German shelling along the Nazi-

Soviet frontier. Stalin at first refused to believe that the worst had occurred and he said, "Hitler surely doesn't know about it" (14). Later in the morning of 22 June, Stalin ordered the Soviet foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov to seek out the German ambassador to the USSR, Friedrich von Schulenburg. The latter confirmed Nazi Germany's declaration of war on the Soviet Union.

A dismayed Molotov (image on the right) reported back to Stalin,

"The German government has declared war on us". Robert Service, the British historian of Soviet history, noted that upon hearing this, "Stalin slumped in his chair and an unbearable silence followed". When General Georgy Zhukov then suggested they put in place measures, to hold up the German advance, Service wrote "Stalin continued to stipulate that Soviet ground forces should not infringe German territorial integrity". (15)

Contrary to what is commonly claimed, on learning that the Germans had certainly attacked with Hitler's agreement, Stalin did not suffer a breakdown and disappear. On 23 June 1941 for example, as Service wrote in his biography of the Soviet ruler, "Stalin worked without rest in his Kremlin office. For 15 hours at a stretch from 3.20 am, he consulted with the members of the Supreme Command" (16). As the hours went by Service writes that Stalin "called generals to his office, made his enquiries about the situation to the west of Moscow, and gave his instructions. About his supremacy there was no doubt".



Only from the early morning of 29 June 1941 did Stalin suffer a relapse, and retire to his nearby dacha in a deeply depressed condition. This was quite probably a delayed reaction brought on by his difficult visit, on 27 June, to the Soviet Ministry of Defence. When Generals Zhukov and Semyon Timoshenko showed Stalin, on operational maps, the astonishing advancements made by the German Army, Service wrote that Stalin "was shocked by the extent of the disaster for the Red Army". (17)

Image on the left: General Zhukov

By 27 June, units from German Army Group Centre had already reached Minsk, the capital of Soviet Belorussia, and less than 450 miles west of Moscow. Shaken and disturbed by this Stalin reportedly lamented, "Lenin founded our state and we've f**ked it up". (18)

After Hitler had ordered the attack against Russia on 22 June, the authorities in Britain and America forecast another brisk German victory. Their views were influenced by the apparent invincibility of the Wehrmacht, their dislike of Bolshevism, and also Stalin's recent purge of the Red Army. Outside observers mistakenly believed the purge had decimated Soviet fighting capacity. Mawdsley in his extensive study of the Nazi-Soviet war wrote, "Many able

middle-level commanders survived the purges” while the “commanders and commissars who were shot made up a minority”. (19)

A major offensive in the modern era, perhaps in any age, constitutes a huge gamble on the part of the invader, brutal as these attacks usually are, and the Nazi invasion was the most vicious of all. Various factors can combine to result in its failure: strength of the invasion force, strategic errors, quality of the terrain, underestimation of the enemy, the weather, etc. These elements are magnified when attacking the world’s largest country (Russia), as Napoleon had discovered and soon Hitler too.

Nevertheless, there are a couple of overwhelming reasons why the German attack would fail. Firstly, Hitler did not place the German nation on a Total War footing, until February 1943, much too late. The Nazi economy in the early 1940s produced an “extraordinary degree of inefficiency and wastefulness”, the English historian Richard Overy discerned (20). It resulted in labour shortages, fewer German weapons, aircraft and panzers, and less soldiers, while German women for the most part remained at home, rather than working in the armament factories.

After the defeat of France, a full mobilisation of German manpower would have produced a Wehrmacht attacking force of about 6 million men in June 1941 (21). This is double the size of the 3 million German soldiers which invaded Russia that month. Taking into account strategic mistakes committed and heroic Russian resistance, a German invasion with 6 million troops would surely have been too much for the Soviets to contend with, and it was possible to achieve.

Albert Speer, German Minister of Armaments and Munitions from 1942-1945, wrote on 29 March 1947,

“In the middle of 1941, Hitler could easily have had an army equipped twice as powerfully as it was... We could even have mobilised approximately 3 million more men of the younger age-groups before 1942, without losses in production... 3 million additional soldiers would have added up to many divisions. These, moreover, could have been excellently equipped as a result of the increased production”. (22)

Another monumental error, on the part of the German high command and Hitler, was the strategic design for Operation Barbarossa. This consisted of splitting their forces into three large Army Groups, and ordering them to capture three different objectives simultaneously (Leningrad, Moscow and the Ukraine); rather than directing their resources towards easily the most important goal – Moscow, the communications stronghold and heartbeat of Soviet Russia, which will be discussed further here.

Lt. Col. Goodspeed, a skilled military strategist, wrote that,

“Although in operations and tactics the German Army had proved itself far and away superior to the Red Army, the same could not be said of German strategy. The fault was so simple and obvious that a child might have foreseen it. The German high command had attempted too many things at the same time”. (23)

The German attack was launched across almost the entire breadth of the western USSR. Its Schwerpunkt, that is the heavy point of the German blow, fell north of the famous Pripet Marshes in Belorussia. However, the Germans and their Axis allies were ordered to attack

everywhere at once. The strategic planning for Barbarossa went beyond even the Wehrmacht's military capabilities; it was breathtaking in its boldness, irresponsible and grotesque.

Goodspeed summarised,

"But Hitler wanted too much and, as a consequence, got nothing. This same fundamental error was repeated again and again. It recurs like a leitmotif in the Führer's strategic thought. When the advance against Moscow might have been successfully resumed in August, and previous mistakes rectified, Hitler turned his thrust south into the Ukraine and north against Leningrad. Again, two objectives and both of them the wrong ones. When Leningrad might have been taken in September, Hitler diverted forces back from Army Group North to Moscow, and thereby captured neither Leningrad nor Moscow". (24)

This viewpoint is supported by Mawdsley who pinpointed the "mistake that Hitler and his high command made in 1941" which was "to attack everywhere" (25). Hitler did not designate primary importance to Moscow, until it was weeks too late. The Russian capital held critical significance as the centre of Soviet communications, which was recognised by military leaders like Field Marshal Fedor von Bock, the commander of German Army Group Centre, which was supposed to capture Moscow (26). Virtually all roads and railways led to the capital, like spokes into the hub of a wheel.

This was not the case when Napoleon's forces had occupied Moscow on 14 September 1812. Moscow at that time did not hold the same status, by comparison to its importance in the 20th century, when armies had become reliant on railways and motorised transport for supplies. The first railway line in Russia was built in 1837, a quarter of a century after Napoleon's invasion.

Were Moscow to be captured in the autumn of 1941, the Russians would have had tremendous difficulty supplying and reinforcing their northern and southern fronts (27). This includes the Leningrad and Ukrainian sectors. The rail system of the western USSR would have been shattered, inflicting a hammer blow on the Soviet Army.

Goodspeed wrote that from Barbarossa's outset,

"Quite conceivably, a single great thrust along the Warsaw-Smolensk-Moscow axis might have secured the Russian capital for the Germans by the end of August. Army Groups North and South could have acted as flank guards for such a thrust, and once the Russian centre had been demolished and the communications hub of Moscow taken, the Soviet northern and southern fronts would have been isolated from one another. Then a drive down the Volga in September might well have achieved a second victory, greater even than the Battle of Kiev. This done, Leningrad and the northern front could have been dealt with at leisure, and by another overwhelming concentration of force". (28)

One major thrust towards Moscow would, also, have taken the ferocious Russian weather out of the equation. The autumn rains and snow arrived in force from early October 1941, weeks after Moscow could have been taken. As events panned out, such weather seriously slowed the German advance.

The political ramifications of Moscow's capitulation would have been considerable too. Stalin and his entourage were headquartered there. What would Stalin have done had Moscow fallen to the Germans in August or September 1941? He may have decided to stay and thereby seal his fate, or he could have chosen to relocate to Asiatic Russia, where it would have been arduous to hold together a government.

Most importantly of all, as Germany's generals were aware, the bulk of the Red Army was centred in front of Moscow for the defence of the capital. If these Russian divisions were to be surrounded in a vast pincers movement and forced to surrender, the war would have been practically over. (29)

Two months into the invasion, on 21 August 1941 Hitler fatefully intervened in the direction of the war, believing he would be proved right and the German generals wrong – as had been repeatedly the case on political matters. Hitler compounded Barbarossa's early strategic mistakes by ordering on this date: "The most important objective to be taken before the coming of the winter is NOT the capture of Moscow, but the capture of the Crimea and of the industrial and coal-mining area of the Donets, and the cutting off of Russian oil supplies from the Caucasus; and to the north the investment of Leningrad and the linking up with the Finns". (30)

Hitler's Chief of Operations, General Alfred Jodl, defended this decision by claiming that Hitler wished to avoid the blunders of Napoleon (31). As mentioned earlier, Moscow was of much greater importance in the year 1941 as opposed to 1812. Hitler was greedy and saw too many things at once, rather than focusing on a single goal at a time (similar strategic errors were committed in July 1942, when Hitler split up his forces to capture two objectives simultaneously, Stalingrad and the Caucasus).

Hitler's wish, to strike everywhere, could have been influenced too because of his desire to spread as much death and destruction to the Soviet Union as possible, which he believed was the homeland of "Jewish Bolshevism".

Upon hearing the new orders of 21 August 1941, two days later General Heinz Guderian travelled west to Hitler's headquarters, situated in the dense forests near Rastenburg, East Prussia. Guderian, commanding the 2nd Panzer Group, informed Hitler that the taking of Moscow would paralyse the Soviet transportation and communication networks; the general stressed the political significance of Moscow's demise, and the huge lift it would provide to German morale. (32)

Moreover, Guderian insisted that the fall of the capital would make it easier to conquer other parts of the USSR, such as the Ukraine. Yet Hitler's mind was firmly set and he told Guderian that his generals "know nothing of the economic aspects of war". The orders were left unchanged.

Goodspeed observed,

"Thus, quietly, in a headquarters far from the sound of guns, Germany lost the war. The Führer directive of August 21, 1941, marked a great turning point in modern history. Many horrors were still to come, and mankind has by no means moved out from the darkness of these times, but at least the world was to be spared a Nazi victory". (33)

General Franz Halder, Chief of Staff of the German Army High Command, stated that Hitler's

above directive was “decisive to the outcome of this campaign”. (34)

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Chapter V

Operation Barbarossa, an Overview

The USSR's hierarchy was caught unprepared, and unnecessarily so, when Nazi Germany invaded their country eight decades ago on 22 June 1941, in a military offensive titled Operation Barbarossa. It was named after King Frederick Barbarossa, a red-bearded Prussian emperor who in the 12th century had waged war against the Slavs.

On the sixth day of the attack, 27 June 1941, German Army Group Center had already reached Minsk, the capital of Soviet Belarus. Amazingly it meant, at this very early stage, that the Germans were closer to Moscow than Berlin: as the crow flies, the Wehrmacht was now 430 miles from the Russian capital as opposed to 590 miles from the German capital.

After a week of fighting, the Soviets had lost around 600,000 troops and thousands of their aircraft had been destroyed, the majority of them on the ground. When on 27 June the Soviet commanders, Georgy Zhukov and Semyon Timoshenko, showed Joseph Stalin on operational maps that the Germans had advanced on Minsk, he was visibly [shocked](#) by the magnitude of the disaster. Should Stalin have been so surprised, considering the

unprecedented rapidity the year before at which the Germans had blazed through France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg?

In the middle of 1941, Stalin had been in charge of the Soviet Union for over a decade whereas, in Germany, Adolf Hitler was in control for little more than 8 years. By the early 1940s, the Wehrmacht was Europe's most efficient military organization and killing machine. This was in some contrast to the larger Red Army, whose poor display against Finland's paltry armed forces, from 30 November 1939 to 13 March 1940 (the Winter War), provided stark evidence of the harm imparted on the Soviet military by Stalin's purges, which had begun in May 1937.

British historian Evan Mawdsley wrote that "the purges certainly played a most important part in what happened on and after 22 June 1941". Marshal Zhukov, one of the most celebrated commanders in Russian history, was heavily critical of the purges after the war, which will be elaborated upon further here.

It can be mentioned firstly, however, that the extent of the Soviet military purges has tended to be exaggerated and distorted down the years. There were 142,000 Soviet Army commanders and commissars in 1937, just before the purges started. Mawdsley [noted](#), "It is sometimes suggested that half the leadership of the Red Army was wiped out, which was certainly not the case" as "the Red Army commanders and commissars who were shot made up a minority" of the entire Russian military leadership corps.

The damage inflicted on the top ranks was still extensive. Three out of five marshals and 20 Soviet army commanders, along with dozens of corps and divisional commanders among others, were liquidated between 1937 and 1941. The loss of high-level officers inevitably undermined and weakened the Red Army's command apparatus, and it came at a time when the clouds of war were ominously gathering in Europe.

Marshal Zhukov [wrote](#) in his memoirs of "unfounded arrests in the armed forces" which were "in contravention of socialist legality. Prominent military leaders were arrested which, naturally, affected the development of our armed forces and their combat preparedness".

Altogether, more than 34,000 Soviet officers were dismissed from the military as the purges ran their course, but a third of these (11,500) were eventually reinstated; perhaps most notably Konstantin Rokossovsky, who became one of the most important Soviet commanders of World War II. English author Geoffrey Roberts, writing in his biography of Zhukov, [realized](#) that "the vast majority of the armed forces" had "survived the purges", which is necessary to stress.

Yet in the weeks before and after the German invasion, when the initiative to make crucial and independent decisions was needed, much paralysis reigned in the Soviet high command; which had been disproportionately affected by the purges.

Mawdsley, who specializes in Russian affairs, wrote of the Red Army leaders that were victimized, "These men possessed the fullest professional, educational and operational experience the Red Army had accumulated... Despite professional and personal rivalries among themselves, these leaders had formed a fairly cohesive command structure. The paradox is that this is why Stalin mistrusted them".

An eminent Soviet diplomat, Andrei Gromyko, who was the USSR's Foreign Affairs Minister

from 1957 to 1985, was first introduced to Stalin in 1939 and saw him many times thereafter. Gromyko became acquainted too with Soviet Army dignitaries like Zhukov. In Gromyko's book 'Memories: From Stalin to Gorbachev', he wrote that Zhukov "spoke bitterly of the enormous damage Stalin had inflicted on the country by his massacre of the top echelons of the army command".

Gromyko recalled Zhukov saying of the Soviet military men that were purged, "Of course, I regard them as innocent victims. Tukhachevsky was an especially damaging loss for the army and the state". Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky, known overseas as "the Red Napoleon", was a central figure in the Russian Army's modernization during the 1920s and 1930s. Zhukov first met Tukhachevsky in 1921 and he later [described](#) him as, "A clever, knowledgeable professional, he was splendidly conversant with both tactical and strategic problems... Tukhachevsky was an ace of military thinking, a star of the first magnitude among the great soldiers of the Red Army".

Zhukov stated that he himself came under suspicion as the purges were unfolding, due to his connections to some of the accused. He vigorously defended his position and avoided censure. Moreover, Zhukov informed Gromyko, "Before the war, the political decision to arm fully was taken very late, and that was the main problem".

While Zhukov's criticism on the latter point is also valid, Stalin had engineered a massive increase in the Soviet arms budget from the early 1930s onward, and for this he should be commended. Part of Bolshevik ideology is a belief in the virtue of motorized machines and warfare, without which the Red Army could not have defeated the Wehrmacht and its panzer divisions. Five months before the German attack Stalin [told](#) his senior commanders, "the winning side will be the one with the greater number and the more powerful engines".

Between 1932 and 1937, spending on the Soviet military increased by 340% in overall terms, undoubtedly as a result of Stalin's direct influence. Through 1937 to 1940 expenditure [doubled](#) again on the Soviet defense budget. From 1939, the USSR was constructing over 10,000 warplanes per year, along with almost 3,000 tanks, more than 17,000 artillery pieces and 114,000 machine guns. Payment and conditions for Soviet officers had meanwhile improved greatly, so it was far from being all doom and gloom.

The above figures on Soviet armed capacity were unknown to the Germans; that is, until after they had attacked the USSR, when it soon became obvious the Red Army was much more formidable than Nazi intelligence had estimated. As Mawdsley revealed, German agencies calculated that the Russians had 10,000 tanks in June 1941, whereas in reality they possessed 23,100 tanks. The Germans thought there were 6,000 Soviet aircraft in mid-1941, but in the whole of the USSR there were 20,000 planes, with 9,100 of these positioned near the Nazi-Soviet border.

Under Stalin's leadership the Russians achieved a remarkable relocation of industry eastwards, in the months following the German assault. This policy was critical to ensuring the Soviet Union could continue producing weaponry en masse, and largely secure from the Nazi onslaught.

Irish professor and geographer John Sweeney [wrote](#), "Over 1,500 industrial enterprises were transplanted, between July and November 1941 alone, to what were considered relatively safe refuges in the interior. The Urals (which received 667 of these enterprises), Kazakhstan and Central Asia (308), West Siberia (244), the Volga Region (226) and East Siberia (78),

benefited permanently from this massive injection of industrial investment, and it was in this heartland area that urban growth during the post-war recovery period was concentrated”.

Relating to manpower, the Red Army was likewise significantly bigger than Hitler and his generals believed. In June 1941 Soviet forces consisted of more than 300 divisions, [amounting](#) to 5.5 million personnel, 2.7 million of which were stationed in the western USSR. The Germans thought there were only 200 Russian divisions in existence, despite the fact the Soviet population was appreciably greater than Germany and Nazi-occupied Europe combined. In comparison the German invasion force comprised of 3 million men, supported by less than a million troops from its Axis allies such as Romania and Finland, led by the anti-Bolshevik military leaders Ion Antonescu and Gustaf Mannerheim respectively.

Seven weeks into the German invasion, General Franz Halder acknowledged in his diary, “The whole situation makes it increasingly plain that we have underestimated the Russian colossus”. Not long after, even Hitler admitted in a speech in central Berlin, “We had no idea how gigantic the preparations of this enemy were”.

Zhukov and Timoshenko were acutely aware of the massing of German, Finnish and Romanian divisions adjacent to the USSR’s boundaries. The Soviet Army’s foreign intelligence agency (the GRU) confirmed on 15 June 1941, just a week before Operation Barbarossa commenced, that a huge transfer had taken place of German forces to the Nazi-Soviet frontier; with 120 to 122 Wehrmacht divisions reportedly [deployed](#) there.

Zhukov told Stalin repeatedly, and as late as mid-June 1941, to be prepared in the case of a German attack. Stalin in turn [insisted](#) a few days before Wehrmacht-led armies invaded, “Germany has a Treaty of Non-Aggression with us. Germany is involved up to its ears in the war in the West, and I believe that Hitler will not risk creating a second front for himself by attacking the Soviet Union”.

From November 1940 to June 1941, Stalin personally [received](#) a total of 80 intelligence reports warning about a German invasion, according to English historian Andrew Roberts. In mitigation to Stalin, a fair proportion of the intelligence accounts proved inaccurate regarding the invasion start date; others constituted misinformation planted by the Germans; but most reports were genuine and some uncannily close to the mark, like the material sent to the Kremlin by Richard Sorge, a now famous Soviet spy then operating in the German embassy in Tokyo.

Stalin was further warned about Nazi intentions by Soviet agents like the courageous Leopold Trepper in Paris, and also Victor Sukolov in Belgium. The most plausible and detailed reports of all indeed came from Soviet sources, and they peaked in intensity during the first three weeks of June 1941 – along with [alarming](#) information forthcoming that Hitler’s allies Finland and Romania were mobilizing for war against Russia. This could not be ignored.

Robert Service, in his lengthy book on Stalin, wrote that, “For weeks the Wehrmacht had been massing on the western banks of the River Bug, as dozens of divisions were transferred from elsewhere in Europe. The Luftwaffe had sent squadrons of reconnaissance aircraft over Soviet cities. All this had been reported to Stalin by his military intelligence agency. In May and June [1941], he had been continually pressed by Timoshenko and Zhukov to sanction the dispositions for an outbreak of fighting. Richard Sorge, the Soviet agent in the German embassy in Tokyo, had raised the alarm. Winston Churchill had sent

telegrams warning Stalin. The USSR's spies in Germany had mentioned the preparations being made. Even the Chinese Communist Party alerted Moscow about German intentions".

By the second half of June 1941, Stalin was counting on it being too late in the year for the Germans to attack. Regardless, the French commander Napoleon, generations before fast-moving motorized vehicles emerged, had launched his invasion of Russia on 24 June 1812, two days later in June than the Germans.

In addition the spring rains arrived late in the western USSR in 1941, and they were much heavier than normal. Many of the river valleys, including the strategically important River Bug in eastern Poland, were still [flooded](#) at the late date of 1 June 1941. This meant that an attack on the Soviet Union could not have proceeded until after then.

Chapter VI

Hitler's Early Victories, the Wolf's Lair Headquarters

In Hitler's goals to attain Germanic dominion of the planet, he enjoyed some of his most triumphant days secured away at the vast, virtually unheard of Wolf's Lair. The complex was known in the German tongue as Wolfsschanze. Hitler had inserted "Wolf" into the title of many of his military headquarters, as it was a self-appointed nickname.

Situated over 400 miles from Berlin in East Prussia, Hitler arrived at the Wolf's Lair for the first occasion during late evening of 23 June 1941. The advanced time was not an issue. From the days of Hitler's "struggle" beginning in the early 1920s, he had developed a habit of remaining active until the small hours, often present in rowdy beer halls, and rising as late as noon.

On the night of 23 June 1941, the dictator was again in no mood for bed rest; his form was in fact jubilant as remarkable news filtered through from the Eastern Front. Less than 48 hours after the invasion began, German armies were smashing through the first bewildered Soviet lines, and had already reached the USSR republics of Lithuania, Belarus and the Ukraine.

Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, Hitler's most trusted military companion, also travelled eastwards to join his leader at the new Wolf's Lair. As Operation Barbarossa rolled mercilessly along, Keitel's disposition remained pensive and austere. It was the 58-year-old Keitel, almost standing alone in isolation, who had warned Hitler not to attack the Soviet Union.

Conservative and cautious by nature, Keitel detected the unmistakable sense of danger in the air. He was convinced that assaulting a landmass as great as the USSR – with its numerous complications – would be a task too much, even for the apparently unstoppable Wehrmacht. Due to Keitel's reputation as a willing pawn of Hitler, he was held in poor esteem by an array of German generals and field marshals.

Yet Keitel's military career had dated to the year 1901, and he possessed a distinguished record, claiming honours for bravery during the First World War while rising through the

ranks. Keitel's demeanour was that of a charming and approachable officer, educated in the old-fashioned virtues of the Prussian military establishment. Keitel possessed strong organizational and literary skills, but lacked the insubordinate, resolute nature to challenge Hitler directly.

Keitel had said later,

"It isn't right to be obedient only when things go well; it is much harder to be a good, obedient soldier when things go badly and times are hard. Obedience and faith at such time is a virtue".

His subservience would inevitably lead to a complicity in some of the Nazis' atrocious crimes.

Unlike Keitel, the great majority of German military leaders firmly supported Hitler's decision to attack Russia, believing the conflict would last around two months with Stalin's expected ousting and death. The Nazi war chiefs' unrealistic confidence swayed Hitler, who believed the Red Army would fold like a pack of cards. By mid-1941 Hitler had still to assume personal command of men in the field, and he unavoidably lacked the required knowledge and expertise.

Meanwhile, on the same evening that Hitler first entered the Wolf's Lair (23 June 1941), one of the largest tank engagements in military history was starting. It was called the Battle of Brody: A near forgotten clash in north-western Ukraine between 750 panzers and 3,500 Soviet tanks, stretching across the cities of Brody, Dubno and Lutsk. About 350 miles northwards Hitler was in tune to proceedings from the Wolf's Lair, and awaiting further stunning reports. They would come.

Despite the Nazis being outnumbered by more than four to one during the Battle of Brody, their panzers bludgeoned a way to victory by 30 June 1941. The Germans destroyed many hundreds of Soviet tanks, while meting out 65,000 casualties upon the Red Army. For mile after mile, this section of north-western Ukraine was strewn with dead bodies and horses, shattered Soviet armoured vehicles along with battered heavy weaponry.

The triumph around Brody consolidated vital German gains on the Ukraine's western boundaries. It was also an indication of the ferocity of Hitler's troops, as they unleashed what would be the bloodiest invasion of all time.

Also on the night Hitler became acquainted with the Wolf's Lair, the Battle of Raseiniai was under way in western Lithuania; it was another critical early meeting between around 240 panzers and 750 Soviet tanks. Outmatched by three to one, the Germans were again victorious in the face of seemingly daunting odds. By 27 June 1941, they had destroyed over 700 of the Soviets' 750 tanks near Raseiniai, a medieval Lithuanian town. The Luftwaffe also provided telling air support when it was needed.

Further south Lithuania's capital, Vilnius, had easily been captured on 24 June 1941 and Kaunas, the country's second largest city, capitulated that day too. Germany's Army Group North, under Field Marshal Ritter von Leeb, was now positioned 600 miles from Moscow; yet his key objective was to seize the major Russian city of Leningrad closer to the north.

As a Blitzkrieg easily overcame Red Army resistance in Lithuania, an onlooking Hitler had been situated a mere 90 miles from the Lithuanian border at his Wolf's Lair. In Hitler's

choice of headquarters across Europe, it was his desire to be as near the fighting as conceivably possible. Previously, as the Battle of France commenced (10 May–25 June 1940), Hitler's compound, the Wolf's Ravine (Wolfsschlucht), was erected in the Belgian village of Brûly-de-Pesche.

While the Nazi leader oversaw France's swift and humiliating defeat, he became a resident for over two weeks at this Belgian hamlet. Brûly-de-Pesche is only five miles from the French northern frontier, and Paris was within comfortable driving distance.

Choice of location for the Wolf's Lair was painstakingly assessed; in late 1940, construction began in the ancient and mysterious Masurian woods, near a small Prussian town called Rastenburg. The Wolf's Lair was clear of urban centres and primary roads, while its entire complex covered 2.5 square miles. It was safeguarded by three security zones, and disguised by extensive netting that cleverly mimicked leaf cover when viewed from above.

Otto Skorzeny, the SS commando, wrote that

"I was ordered to the Wolfsschanze [Wolf's Lair] nine times and also flew over it; it was so very well camouflaged from air attack that one could only see trees. The guarded access roads snaked through the forest, in such a way that I would have been unable to give the exact location of the Führer headquarters".

Regardless of Hitler's growing fears and precautions, not one bomb was dropped on the Wolf's Lair, while his private secretary Traudl Junge later revealed "there was never more than a single aircraft hovering over the forest". This is despite the fact that Hitler spent over 800 days immersed there.

As Germany's victories mounted, the prevailing mood at the Wolf's Lair became increasingly euphoric. At the end of June 1941, German forces had claimed a significant success when capturing Minsk, the sprawling capital of Belarus. By 11 July 1941, the Wehrmacht had conquered vast regions of Belarus, a state rivalling the size of Great Britain.

In doing so, the Nazis [inflicted](#) almost 420,000 casualties on Soviet divisions around the Belarusian capital, while the invaders lost only 12,000 men by comparison.

During fighting near Minsk, the Red Army further saw 4,800 of its tanks eliminated and up to 1,700 aircraft destroyed, while the Germans were shorn of just 100 panzers and 275 airplanes. The scale of victory is put into even sharper perspective when considering the Wehrmacht had a combined total of about 3,500 panzers, and little more than 2,000 warplanes.

While July 1941 proceeded, German infantrymen were pouring forward onto the very borders of Russia, taking the town of Ostrov on 4 July, in north-west Russia – followed, on 8 July, by their capturing Pskov 30 miles further north.

From the small city of Pskov, Moscow lay but 450 miles further east. As the world looked on in wonder, including the Americans and British, it seemed an eventuality the Nazis would cover these last few hundred miles, and overwhelm the Russian capital.

By 10 July 1941, the 13th Panzer Division (of Army Group South) had advanced to the Irpin River, just over 10 miles from Kiev, the capital of the Ukraine – a country with a rich agricultural base that would help sustain Germany's foot soldiers. Yet it would not be for

another nine weeks until Kiev itself fell, with the surrendering of almost 700,000 Soviet troops.

In the meantime, due to the incredible progression and devastation wrought, it was perhaps not surprising that on 8 July 1941 a boastful Hitler was telling propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, "The war in the east was in the main already won". Hitler was simply echoing the views of his commanders.

As early as 3 July 1941 the 57-year-old Franz Halder, Chief of the Army General Staff, [had written](#) in his diary,

"So it's really not saying too much, if I claim that the campaign against Russia has been won in 14 days".

The experienced Halder was surely letting himself get carried away. In the autumn of 1942 Halder would be sacked by Hitler, due to their ongoing disagreements over Russian fighting capacity, with the dictator saying to him,

"We now need National Socialist ardour rather than professional ability to settle matters in the East. Obviously, I cannot expect this of you".

Hitler replaced Halder with General Kurt Zeitzler, who was thought to be a genius in his ability to manoeuvre large formations across battlefields, and perceive danger. It was expected that Zeitzler would finally move German armies to where Hitler wanted them to go.

Chapter VII

Operation Barbarossa, Analysis of Early Fighting

The German-led invasion of the Soviet Union began at 3:15 am, on 22 June 1941, with an enormous artillery barrage along the Nazi-Soviet frontier. The USSR's hierarchy had counted on it being too late in the year for German forces to attack, despite warnings to the contrary.

Comprising part of the German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact, Russian deliveries of commodities to Nazi Germany continued until the final moments; the last trainload arrived into the Reich at 2 am on 22 June, which amused the onlooking German soldiers who were about to advance into the Soviet Union.

During the attack's opening phase, much went according to plan for the invaders.

Nearly all of the bridges across the vast front were taken by the Germans intact. Many hundreds of Soviet aircraft were either shot down, destroyed on the ground, or fell undamaged into the enemy's hands. Significant numbers of Soviet troops were on leave, while other Red Army divisions were separated from their artillery when the Wehrmacht

swarmed across the border. Many Russian formations were simply overrun, and taken prisoner, before they had an opportunity to form an effective defence. In the first week of the invasion, the Soviet Army saw around 600,000 of its troops either killed, captured or wounded.



A key proponent of the Blitzkrieg (Lightning War) concept, General Heinz Guderian commanding Panzer Group 2, was concerned that the first panzer thrusts were not penetrating deeply enough. His fears seem unfounded; on the fourth day of the invasion, 25 June 1941, Army Group Centre had cut off and encircled two entire Soviet armies east of Bialystok, in north-eastern Poland. On 27 June Army Group Centre reached Minsk, the capital of Soviet Belarus, meaning the German spearhead was closer to Moscow than Berlin.

On 3 July 1941, all Soviet divisions in the Bialystok Bend of the Niemen River had been wiped out. Army Group Centre opened its pincers, and closed them again on the Red Army forces west of Minsk. The German claws snapped shut on 10 July, and in this huge trap 33 Soviet divisions were eliminated, amounting to over 300,000 men. The Russians also lost 4,800 tanks along with 9,400 guns and mortars.

Southward, Gerd von Rundstedt's Army Group South attacked the region of Galicia, which covers parts of eastern Poland and western Ukraine. Soviet forces were larger here and they fought superbly well, under the leadership of General Mikhail Kirponos, who would be killed almost three months later near Kiev in a landmine explosion. Army Group South made slow progress at first, not more than six miles per day. However, before June 1941 was out, Field Marshal von Rundstedt's army had broken into the Ukraine, capturing the cities of Rovno on

28 June and Lvov on 30 June.

Army Group North, commanded by Field Marshal Ritter von Leeb, made initial rapid progress. As part of Panzer Group 4, General Erich von Manstein's 56th Panzer Corps sliced through Lithuania and, by 25 June, had advanced 155 miles to safely capture the bridge over the Daugava River at Daugavpils, in south-eastern Latvia. Von Manstein was halted here for six days, until the German 16th Army infantry divisions could catch up with him. This delay for Army Group North allowed the Russians to fortify their rearguard. When von Leeb's advance resumed on 2 July 1941, they met much stiffer resistance.

In the Soviet Army's central section, their 48-year-old General Andrey Yeremenko, commanding the Soviet Western Front, had instilled new life into the defence. During early July it rained heavily for a brief time, helping further to slow the main German advance. Despite these obstacles, Fedor von Bock's Army Group Centre captured Vitebsk, in north-eastern Belarus, on 10 July. That same day, Guderian's panzers managed to cross the Dnieper River, which flows through eastern Belarus and central Ukraine.

On 16 July 1941, Army Group Centre was at the outskirts of the Russian city of Smolensk, 230 miles from Moscow as the crow flies. It meant, in just over three weeks of fighting, that the Germans had advanced more than two-thirds of the way to Moscow. The Wehrmacht's timetable was running as scheduled. At this period, it seemed that a German victory was inevitable. Already on 15 July, General Hermann Hoth's Panzer Group 3 had bypassed Smolensk to the north, and successfully cut the Smolensk-Moscow highway.



Herman Hoff at the center of the image

Yet the USSR did not crumble like past Wehrmacht victims had. On 16 July the German pincers closed around Smolensk, but the encircled Russians fought on for another three weeks, until 7 August. The Germans captured another 300,000 Soviet troops, but their own casualties were not insignificant and they paused for reorganisation. A principal difference between the Nazi invasion of France, and the Soviet Union, was that the landmass was so

much bigger in the latter nation, and the distances therefore took longer to navigate. In addition, the French road networks were of superior quality to the Russian road system.

As soon as the Germans halted at Smolensk, Soviet troops launched a vigorous counterattack. Extremely heavy fighting ensued in the Yelnya Bend east of Smolensk, and it continued through August 1941. North of the Smolensk-Moscow highway, the Russians also counterattacked, using for the first occasion one of their secret weapons: the Katyusha rocket launcher which the Germans nicknamed “The Stalin Organ”, due to its melancholy wailing sound as it fired multiple rockets. The Russians had 1,000 Katyusha rocket launchers in service during the second half of 1941.

In mid-August 1941 the German invasion was eight weeks old, the length of time in which Adolf Hitler, his commanders and also the Americans and British expected the USSR to be overthrown. By late summer, the Wehrmacht had conquered a great deal of territory but the leading goal, of annihilating the Soviet armies west of the Dnieper River, had not been accomplished.

Below the Pripet Marshes, von Rundstedt’s Army Group South took the Ukrainian cities of Zhitomir and Uman. In the latter city in central Ukraine, four panzer divisions surrounded and destroyed three Russian armies in the first week of August 1941. Hitler and his Axis ally Benito Mussolini visited Uman later that month, on 28 August, in order to inspect the Italian expeditionary force and to call on von Rundstedt’s headquarters, which were located in Uman.

Army Group South now marched down the southern side of the Dnieper Bend, and on 18 August 1941 reached Zaporozhye. On 24 August at Zaporozhye, the Russians blew up their Dnieper Dam in order to stall the enemy. Two days later, the city of Dnipropetrovsk fell to the Germans, little more than 40 miles north of Zaporozhye. The Romanian 4th Army, in the meantime, invaded southern Ukraine and encircled Odessa, a city which contained 600,000 residents, a third of them Jewish. The Romanian 4th Army was joined in the Siege of Odessa by the German 11th Army, but Odessa did not capitulate until 16 October 1941.

Progress was not as quick as Army Group North had expected either. In the north-western USSR, the terrain was more suited to defending and the front was shorter, making it easier for the Soviets to hold the Germans up. Red Army divisions in this sector launched counterattacks too but, regardless, Army Group North captured the Russian city of Pskov on 9 July 1941, fewer than 150 miles south-west of Leningrad.

The way appeared open for a march on Leningrad, between Lake Peipus and Lake Ilmen. This route ensured that the Germans could link up with Marshal Gustaf Mannerheim’s Finnish Army, which was attacking the Russians across the Karelian Isthmus east of Lake Ladoga, Europe’s biggest lake. Hitler stated that, “We Germans only have affection for Finland”, which he said was not the case between the Germans and Italians, only between himself and Mussolini. By now the Axis armies were reinforced with Hungarian, Croatian and Slovenian units.

Von Leeb’s divisions ran into a strong Soviet defensive line, bypassing Lake Ilmen and the Narva River on the Gulf of Finland, which it took Army Group North three weeks to overcome. Army Group North’s advance resumed on 8 August 1941, and though the Russians continued to resist, Novgorod fell on 15 August, one of Russia’s oldest cities.

Towards the end of August 1941, von Leeb's left wing was within 25 miles of Leningrad. On 29 August the Finns took the town of Viipuri, less than 80 miles north-west of Leningrad. The following day, 30 August, the Germans entered the urban locality of Mga, which contained the last railway line connecting Leningrad to the remainder of Russia.

It looked as if Leningrad was doomed, and while von Leeb's divisions closed on the famous city, another campaign was unfolding in Arctic Russia. Hitler had decided that he wanted the strategically important Russian port city of Murmansk, over 600 miles north of Leningrad. He dispatched General Eduard Dietl's Mountain Corps, so as to capture Murmansk by advancing from the Petsamo region of northern Finland. Further south, the German 36th Corps was to sever the Murmansk railway line at the town of Kandalaksha; and further south still, the 3rd Finnish Corps was to cut the rail link at Loukhi.

All three of these German-Finnish operations failed, and Murmansk remained in Soviet hands but it was continually bombed by the Luftwaffe.

Regarding president Franklin Roosevelt's Lend-Lease program signed into law in March 1941, American equipment entered Murmansk harbour from December 1941. The US military hardware, it should be highlighted, would amount to a small fraction of the matériel Soviet Russia had at its disposal throughout the entire war – the great majority of which was domestically produced by the Russians.

Hardly a scrap of US or British military aid was sent to the Red Army, when the critical fighting was occurring from the late summer to the early winter of 1941. This suggests the Anglo-American powers were quite content to sit back, and watch the Germans and Soviets knock lumps out of each other; while the Americans, in particular, gathered their strength on the sidelines for the conflict they knew they would enter before long.

The Russian historian Evgeniy Spitsyn wrote,

“Out of the almost \$46 billion that was spent on all Lend-Lease aid, the US allocated only \$9.1 billion, i.e., only a little more than 20% of the funds, to the Red Army, which defeated the vast majority of the divisions from Germany and her military satellites. During that time the British Empire was given more than \$30.2 billion, France – \$1.4 billion, China – \$630 million, and even Latin America (!) received \$420 million”.

By the final week of August 1941, von Bock's Army Group Centre was 185 miles from Moscow. The German High Command (OKH) knew what the next objective should be: the Russian capital, in front of which the bulk of the Red Army was being massed for its defence. OKH issued an order on 18 August for the taking of Moscow, but Hitler instead intervened fatally in the war, believing that he knew more about military affairs than the generals. On 21 August he set Moscow temporarily to one side, and ordered that the Wehrmacht capture various targets including Kiev, Leningrad and the Crimea.

This gave Joseph Stalin time to bolster the Soviet defences in front of Moscow. Army Group South was the main beneficiary of Hitler's reallocation of German divisions, as Army Group Centre was stripped of four of its five panzer corps and three infantry corps; but even the Army Group South commander, von Rundstedt, felt those forces should have remained in the centre for the drive on Moscow.

Von Rundstedt was requested by Hitler to institute a giant encirclement in the Dnieper Bend

around Kiev; with the northern flank of Army Group South co-operating with the southern flank of Army Group Centre.

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Chapter VIII

Germans Surround Kiev and Leningrad

In the second half of August 1941, the German strategic plan in their invasion of the USSR was drastically altered. Most of Army Group Center's armor was dispatched southward to the Ukraine, with the Wehrmacht's advance on Moscow postponed temporarily.

By now, the Nazi Security Service was reporting on a "certain unease" and a "decline in the hopeful mood" of the German population. The quick triumph in the east they were assured of by Joseph Goebbels' propaganda had not arrived. The anxiety afflicting the German public was increased by letters sent home from Wehrmacht troops, many of which confirmed that

the attack on the Soviet Union was not progressing as planned. There were also rising numbers of death notices of German soldiers in the newspapers.

Well-known German author Victor Klemperer, who was Jewish, wrote from Dresden with far-sighted accuracy on 2 September 1941,

“The general question is whether things will be decided in Russia before the wet season in the autumn. It does not look like it... One is counting how many people in the shops say ‘Heil Hitler’ and how many ‘Good day’. ‘Good day’ is apparently increasing”.

Hitler himself “realized that his plans for a Blitzkrieg campaign in the east had failed” by early August 1941, German historian Volker Ullrich wrote in the second part of his biography on Hitler. Two weeks later on 18 August, Hitler said outright to Propaganda Minister Goebbels that he and the German generals had “completely underestimated the might and especially the equipment of the Soviet armies”.

Russian tank numbers, for example, were more than twice greater than Nazi intelligence had originally estimated, and the Red Army itself was much larger than predicted. Seven weeks into the invasion, on 11 August 1941 General Franz Halder, Chief-of-Staff of the German Army High Command (OKH), stated in his diary, “At the start of the war, we anticipated around 200 enemy divisions. But we have already counted 360”.

Yet, as September 1941 began, it seemed quite possible that Hitler was pulling off another telling victory to silence his commanders’ doubts. In dry weather with clear skies overhead Panzer Group 2, led by General Heinz Guderian, captured the northern Ukrainian city of Chernigov on 9 September 1941, just 80 miles north of the capital, Kiev. Guderian’s panzers drove east, thereafter, to take the long Desna Bridge at Novgorod Severskiy.

Colonel-General Ewald von Kleist’s four panzer divisions, belonging to Army Group South, rolled northwards to link up with Guderian’s armor. It was becoming obvious to Soviet military men that the Germans were implementing a gigantic pincers movement, which was aimed at cutting off all of the Russian armies within the Dnieper Bend and, in doing so, surrounding Kiev. The 58-year-old Marshal Semyon Budyonny, leading the Soviet Southwestern and Southern Fronts, could see this clearly. He pleaded in vain with Joseph Stalin to let him retreat to the Donets River.

From early on Stalin had refused to allow Kiev to be abandoned. His prominent commander Georgy Zhukov warned him, as early as 29 July 1941, that the exposed Ukrainian capital should be forsaken for strategic purposes. An angry Stalin replied to Zhukov “How could you hit upon the idea of surrendering Kiev to the enemy?” Zhukov said throughout August that he “continued to urge Stalin to advise such a withdrawal”. On 18 August, Stalin and the Soviet Supreme High Command (Stavka) issued a directive ordering that Kiev must not be surrendered. Stalin could not bear to give up the Soviet Union’s third largest city without a fight.

At the end of August 1941, the Wehrmacht had forced the Red Army back to a defensive line at the Dnieper River. Kiev lay vulnerable at the end of a long salient. Stalin then compounded his original strategic mistake, by reinforcing the area around Kiev with more Red Army divisions.

On 13 September 1941 Major-General Vasily Tupikov, in the Kiev sector, compiled a report

outlining how “complete catastrophe was only a couple of days away”. Stalin responded, “Major-General Tupikov sent a panic-ridden dispatch... The situation, on the contrary, requires that commanders at all levels maintain an exceptionally clear head and restraint. No one must give way to panic”.

The following day, 14 September, von Kleist and Guderian’s panzers met at the Ukrainian city of Lohvytsia, 120 miles east of Kiev. The trap was sealed. Budyonny’s troops fought frantically to extricate themselves but these efforts failed. As also did the Russian attacks coming from further east, which were attempts to rescue the doomed 50 Soviet divisions encircled in the Dnieper Bend.

Kiev fell to the Germans on 19 September 1941, and by the time the fighting died down on 26 September, 665,000 Soviet troops surrendered, the better part of five armies. This was the largest surrender of forces in the field in military history. The Soviets further lost 900 tanks and 3,500 guns. Total Red Army personnel losses in the Kiev area, including casualties, came to 750,000 men. Among the dead was Tupikov who, as mentioned, had tried to warn the Soviet General Staff about the calamity that was set to unfold.

English scholar Geoffrey Roberts wrote, “On 17 September Stavka finally authorized a withdrawal from Kiev, to the eastern bank of the Dnepr. It was too little, too late; the pincers of the German encirclement east of Kiev had already closed”.

After the loss of Kiev, Stalin was “in a trance” according to Zhukov and it understandably took him some days to recover. At this point three months into the Nazi-Soviet war the Red Army had, altogether, lost at least 2,050,000 men, while the Germans had suffered casualties of less than 10% of that number, 185,000 men, the British historian Evan Mawdsley noted. The 185,000 figure still amounted to a higher number of casualties inflicted on the German Army (156,000) in the Battle of France, and the fighting on the Eastern front was of course far from over.

On 23 September 1941 Goebbels visited Hitler at the latter’s military headquarters, the Wolf’s Lair, located near the East Prussian town of Rastenburg. With Kiev having just fallen, Goebbels observed that Hitler looked “healthy” while he was “in an excellent mood and sees the current situation extremely optimistically”.

Hitler took personal credit for taking Kiev, in which he had previously ignored the German commanders’ protests, as they were adamant the advance on Moscow should resume. Hitler told Goebbels that Army Group South would continue marching, in order to capture the USSR’s fourth largest metropolis, Kharkov, in eastern Ukraine, over 250 miles further east of Kiev; and after that they should move on to take Stalingrad, another 385 miles further east again. One of these two goals was reached, with Kharkov falling to the German 6th Army on 24 October 1941. Northwards, Hitler also wanted Leningrad to be utterly subdued, Soviet Russia’s second biggest city.

In his memoirs Marshal Zhukov wrote, “Before the war, Leningrad had a population of 3,103,000 and 3,385,000 counting the suburbs”.

On 8 September 1941 Army Group North had penetrated these suburbs, with the German panzers just 10 miles from the city. So officially began the terrible Siege of Leningrad. During 10 September, Hitler informed lunch guests of his intentions regarding Leningrad, “An example should be made here and the city will disappear from the face of the earth”.

Already on 8 September, the Germans captured the town of Shlisselburg on the south shore of Lake Ladoga. A week later Slutsk (Pavlovsk) fell in Leningrad's outer suburbs, as too did Strelna, close by to the south-west of Leningrad. To the north, the Finnish Army advanced to within a few miles of Leningrad's northernmost suburbs and the city was now surrounded.

The German Armed Forces High Command (OKW), with Hitler's agreement, ordered that Leningrad was not to be taken by storm; but would be bombarded from the air by the Luftwaffe, while the city's residents were to be starved to death through military blockade. On 12 September 1941 the largest food warehouse in Leningrad, the Badajevski General Store, was blown up by a Nazi bomber aircraft.

Moreover, heavy German weaponry and artillery was ominously lined up on the ground, across Leningrad's outskirts. The German guns had sufficient range to strike every street and district of the city, meaning that virtually no house or apartment block in Leningrad was safe, a constant terror for its inhabitants.

Following Hitler's Directive No. 35 of 6 September 1941, Colonel-General Erich Hoepner's Panzer Group 4 was moved away from the Leningrad region on 15 September. It was transferred to the central front for the renewed march towards Moscow. The halting of the German advance on Leningrad, at a time when it appeared on the cusp of success, meant in the end that the city was not captured at all. The 41st Panzer Corps commander, Georg-Hans Reinhardt, had been confident that Leningrad would be taken. Reinhardt was sketching various routes on a map of Leningrad for the advance into the city, when he was ordered to cease his approach.

Nor was Leningrad fully encircled in wintertime when the water froze on Lake Ladoga, by far Europe's largest lake. The Russians were soon able to traverse Lake Ladoga with vehicles carrying food and supplies, though they were regularly assaulted by the Luftwaffe. Fortunately, a large proportion of Leningrad's inhabitants escaped from the city. Zhukov wrote, "As many as 1,743,129, including 414,148 children, were evacuated by decision of the Council of People's Commissars between June 29, 1941 and March 31, 1943".

The Germans were never able to regain the momentum in their initial march towards Leningrad. In November 1941 an offensive to join forces with the Finns east of Lake Ladoga failed. Through December the Germans were forced to retreat to the Volkhov River, about 75 miles south of Leningrad. All efforts to destroy the Soviet bridgehead at Oranienbaum, near to the west of Leningrad, were unsuccessful.

Leningrad was helped in its defense by the city's geographical position, between the Gulf of Finland and Lake Ladoga. In comparison to Kiev or Moscow, Leningrad was considerably easier for the Red Army to defend. Leningrad's western approaches were guarded by the Gulf of Finland, its northern part by the narrow strip of land called the Karelian Isthmus, its south-eastern section by the upper Neva River; while much of the area bordering the city to the south comprised of marshy terrain, which the Germans could not wade through.

Stalin placed even more importance in Leningrad's survival than Kiev. In a telegram of 29 August 1941 sent to his Foreign Affairs Minister Vyacheslav Molotov, an anxious Stalin wrote, "I fear that Leningrad will be lost by foolish madness and that Leningrad's divisions risk being taken prisoner". If the city was captured by Hitler's forces, it would enable the enemy to make a flanking attack northward on Moscow. The loss of the city that bore Lenin's name, the founder of Soviet Russia, could only constitute a serious blow to Russian

morale and a great triumph for the Nazis. The Soviet Union would be deprived of an important center of arms production were Leningrad taken.

On 10 September 1941, Stalin ordered Stavka to appoint Zhukov as commander of the new Leningrad Front. Zhukov, who possessed great ability and energy, helped to stiffen the defenses around Leningrad, forbidding Soviet officers to sanction retreats without written orders from the military command. By late September 1941, the Leningrad front had stabilized.

More than a million Soviet troops would be killed in the Leningrad region, over the next two and a half years. During that time 640,000 of Leningrad's inhabitants died of starvation, and another 400,000 lost their lives due to either illnesses, German shelling and air raids, added to those who perished in the course of evacuations, etc.

The Siege of Leningrad was endured mainly by its female residents. Most of Leningrad's male populace were fighting in the Soviet Army or had joined the People's Militia, divisions of irregular troops. Leningrad's heroic resistance helped to tie down a third of the Wehrmacht's forces in 1941, which assisted in Moscow being saved from German occupation.

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Chapter IX

Germany's Advance into Eastern Ukraine and Crimea

By late September 1941, it was becoming clear to much of the watching world that the German-led invasion of the USSR had not unfolded as the Nazis expected. Three months into Operation Barbarossa the Soviet Union's position was still very serious, however.

At this point the Red Army had suffered at least two million casualties, while the Germans had lost a modest 185,000 men, which gives a firm indication of the Wehrmacht's superiority over the Soviets, in 1941 at least. In north-western Russia, Leningrad was already surrounded from 8 September 1941 by German-Finnish forces. Leningrad was enduring bombardment from the air and the ground, while its inhabitants were being mercilessly starved by blockade. In the coming winter, as much as 100,000 people in Leningrad would die of hunger each month.

To the south, the Ukrainian capital Kiev had fallen on 19 September 1941 to a German pincers movement; as the Red Army suffered an unprecedented loss of around 750,000 men in the Kiev area, the vast majority of them taken prisoner. With Kiev in German hands Army Group South, led by Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, plunged deeper into Ukrainian territory.

As part of Army Group South the German 11th Army, under its new commander Erich von Manstein, occupied Perekop on 27 September 1941, an urban settlement which connects the Ukrainian mainland to the Crimean peninsula. General von Manstein would become one of the Wehrmacht's most formidable commanders of the war.

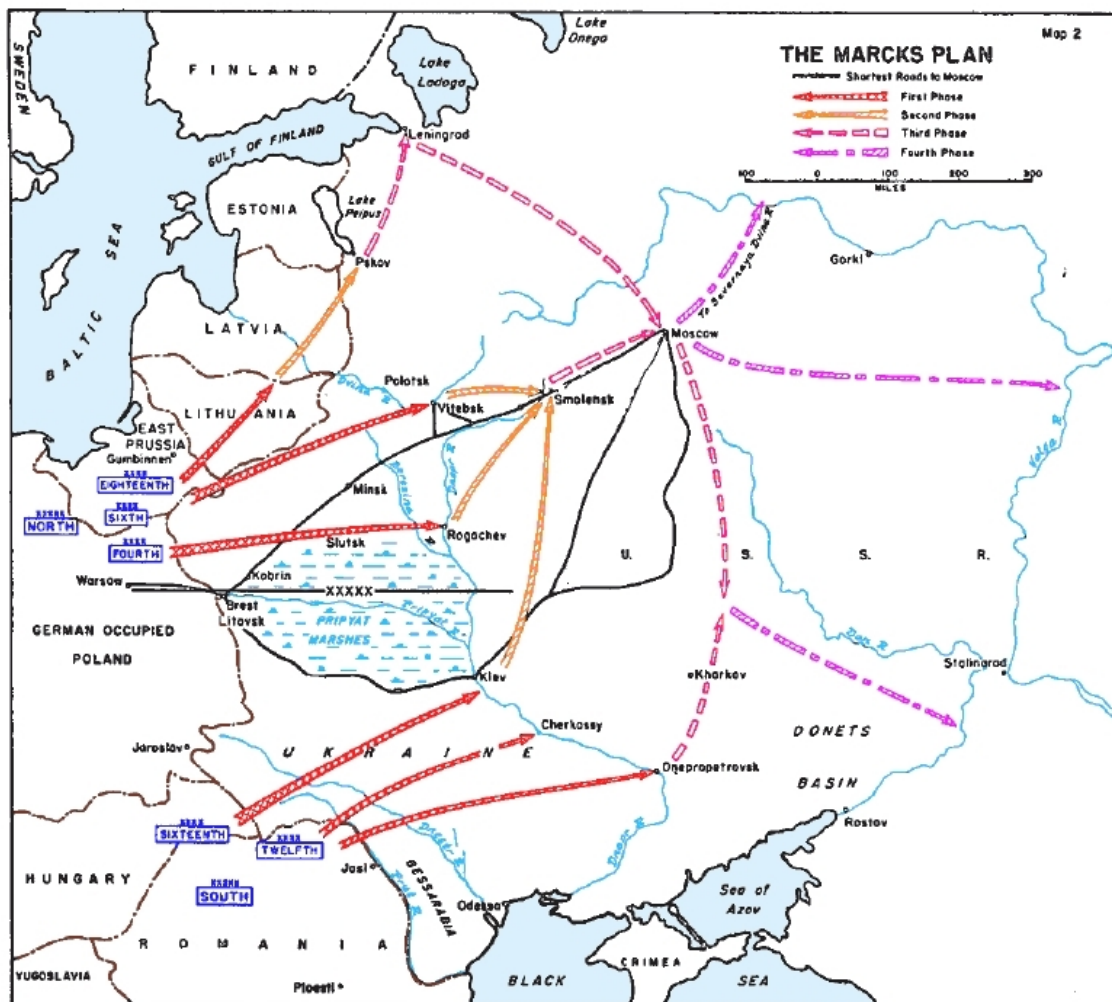
In early October 1941, the German 11th Army proceeded to link up with Ewald von Kleist's Panzer Group 1, now reinforced and called the 1st Panzer Army. They promptly encircled large elements of two Soviet armies east of Melitopol, a city in south-eastern Ukraine and near the Sea of Azov, a body of water slightly greater in size than Belgium. This encounter was, as a result, titled by the Germans as the Battle of the Sea of Azov, a conflict mostly forgotten today.



Elements of the German 3rd Panzer Army on the road near Pruzhany, June 1941 (Licensed under Public

As the noose tightened, the German divisions captured over 100,000 Soviet troops beside the Sea of Azov. The Russians lost more than 200 tanks here and almost 800 guns, while the commander of the Soviet 18th Army, General A. K. Smirnov, was killed in action by artillery fire on 8 October 1941. The historian Aleksander A. Maslov wrote of Smirnov, "The Germans who buried the general placed a plywood board on his grave, with an inscription in Russian, German, and Romanian, exhorting their soldiers to fight as bravely as this Soviet soldier".

With their column of panzers and infantrymen stretching for miles across the horizon, the Germans swept up the coast along the Sea of Azov. The 1st Panzer Army captured Berdiansk, a Ukrainian port city, on 6 October 1941. Two days later, just over 40 miles further east along the shoreline, Mariupol fell, on the north coast of the Sea of Azov. The fighting in this region of south-eastern Ukraine ended on 11 October 1941, with a decisive Wehrmacht victory. British scholar Evan Mawdsley acknowledged that the Battle of the Sea of Azov "was certainly one of the half dozen great Red Army defeats of 1941".



Operation Otto Preliminary Plan for Operation Barbarossa -- August 5th, 1940

The Marcks Plan was the original German plan of attack for Operation Barbarossa, as depicted in a US Government study (March 1955). (Licensed under Public Domain)

The advance itself astride the Sea of Azov continued, as the Germans crossed the Ukrainian frontier into south-western Russia. On 17 October 1941, two SS divisions from the 1st Panzer Army reached Taganrog, home to around 200,000 inhabitants. The SS divisions were

followed from behind by Wehrmacht soldiers.

The German 11th Army had, meanwhile, marched westwards to join forces with Marshal Ion Antonescu's Romanian 4th Army, which had surrounded Odessa in southern Ukraine and on the Black Sea. The engagement here revealed some serious flaws in the Romanians' fighting capabilities, and they were grateful to see the German 11th Army arrive. After two months of stoic opposition, Odessa fell on 16 October 1941 as the Soviet Army retreated from the city.

In following days the Romanian forces, assisted by SS units, would murder tens of thousands of Odessa's Jewish inhabitants (the Odessa massacre). About half of Odessa's Jewish population got out of the city in time. Yitzhak Arad, the former Soviet resistance fighter, wrote that "Odessa had the largest Jewish community with a population of over 205,000" and "between 108,000 to 110,000" of these residents "were evacuated".

Through August and September 1941, the majority of Red Army reserves had been shifted by Joseph Stalin to the crucial Moscow theatre in the center. Von Rundstedt's Army Group South, in part because of this, made steady progress. Army Group South's advance was threatening the eastern Ukrainian city of Kharkov, a great industrial center, while under peril too was the Donbass, an important coal-mining area along with Rostov-on-Don, a Russian city considered to be "the gateway to the Caucasus" and its oil fields.

In the drive towards Kharkov, the Soviet Union's fourth largest metropolis, the German 6th Army captured Sumy on 10 October 1941. The 6th Army was led by Field Marshal Walter von Reichenau, a committed Nazi, and having taken Sumy they were 90 miles from Kharkov. The Jewish Virtual Library (JVL), an encyclopedia detailing Jewish history, outlined that von Reichenau "encouraged his soldiers to commit atrocities against Jews in the territory under his control".

Kharkov was in a dire position. Not only was the German 6th Army advancing rapidly towards the city, but Kharkov's population had swollen to over a million people, as Soviet citizens previously fled from other areas to avoid Nazi occupation. Kharkov's pre-war populace was 840,000, but some estimates state that by September 1941 it almost doubled to 1.5 million.

On 15 October 1941, the Germans took the town of Okhtyrka, just over 60 miles north-west of Kharkov. Twenty-four hours later Bohodukhiv was taken, less than 40 miles from Kharkov. In following days the German 6th Army continued to move forward and, by 20 October, the Soviets completed their evacuation of industrial enterprises from the city. Four days later, on 24 October, von Reichenau's men entered Kharkov and swiftly captured the city.

Kharkov's demise came as a considerable blow. It was an industrial stronghold, where the Soviet T-34 tank had been produced at the Kharkov Tank Factory. Von Reichenau, upon inspecting a captured T-34 tank, reportedly said "If the Russians ever produce it on an assembly line we will have lost the war". He would certainly have been disconcerted to know that, even with the loss of Kharkov, the Soviets built 12,000 T-34 tanks in 1942. Nevertheless, there were fewer than 1,000 T-34s available when the Germans invaded in June 1941; and most of those were destroyed when the really critical fighting was taking place in 1941. With Kharkov subdued, the German 6th Army proceeded to occupy the Donbass in south-eastern Ukraine.

The 1st Panzer Army, supported by the German 17th Army, was marching towards Donetsk (Stalino), 155 miles south of Kharkov. Although the Germans were hampered by supply issues and the start of the autumn rains, they captured Donetsk on 20 October 1941.

By mid-October von Manstein's 11th Army was free to advance into the Crimean peninsula. Hitler had stated in his 21 August 1941 directive, "The Crimea has colossal importance for the protection of oil supplies from Romania. Therefore, it is necessary to employ all available means, including mobile formations, to force the lower reaches of the Dnepr rapidly before the enemy is able to reinforce his forces".

In late October 1941, the panzers broke clear into the Crimea with a costly frontal assault. On 1 November the German 11th Army took Simferopol, the Crimea's second biggest city. On 9 November the Wehrmacht captured Yalta, the southern Crimean resort city, and one of the Soviet Union's most popular holiday destinations. Stalin held possession of a residence in Yalta and he had vacationed there in the summers.

A week after Yalta fell, on 16 November 1941 the German 11th Army occupied Kerch, a coastal city in eastern Crimea. The Germans had overrun almost all of the Crimea and, in doing so, they destroyed 16 Soviet divisions and captured more than 100,000 Red Army troops. Yet the Crimea's largest city, Sevastapol, in the peninsula's far south-west, remained in Russian hands for the time being and was effectively a fortress. Sevastapol was bolstered by the Soviet garrison which had been evacuated from Odessa in October.

The German 6th Army took the Russian city of Kursk on 3 November 1941. Army Group South had now established a line stretching more than 300 miles across, extending along Kursk-Kharkov-Donetsk-Taganrog. Hitler's attention in this region turned further east again to Rostov-on-Don. Rostov contained over half a million people and lay 245 miles south-west of Stalingrad. The taking of Rostov would enable the Wehrmacht to advance towards the Caucasus and Stalingrad.

Luckily for the Germans, in early November 1941 the heavy Russian rainfall (rasputitsa) stopped, to be replaced by clearer weather and colder conditions. With the presence of light frost, the soil hardened and this allowed the panzers, trucks and motorcycles to shift into gear and move across the ground with relative ease.

The German 3rd Army Corps raced ahead to take Rostov, but Sepp Dietrich's SS "Adolf Hitler" motorised division entered the city first. Rostov was captured on 21 November 1941. Nearby, the Germans seized intact the railway bridge over the frozen Don River. They were further able to cut the Caucasus oil pipelines, which Soviet Russia was heavily dependent on.

The Russians, correctly discerning the importance of this sector, launched fierce counterattacks across the Don River against the German positions in Rostov. Soviet casualties were severe, as were the German, and they were too heavy for the latter to endure. Field Marshal von Rundstedt, in overall command of all German divisions in the south-western USSR, asked Hitler for permission to retreat from Rostov.

The 65-year-old von Rundstedt was also a very experienced officer, but Hitler refused his request, and the former resigned in protest on 1 December 1941. Von Reichenau, previously the 6th Army commander, replaced von Rundstedt at the head of Army Group South.

Assessing the situation at Rostov, von Reichenau immediately came to the same conclusion as his predecessor: he therefore asked Hitler for authorisation to retire from Rostov. On 2 December 1941, Hitler took a flight from East Prussia to Mariupol, not far from Rostov and just 60 miles from the front line, in an attempt to resolve the problem himself.

Entering a world with driving blizzards and subzero temperatures, this was a far cry from what Hitler was used to at his Wolfsschanze headquarters, sheltered in the dense Masurian woods. Hitler realised the extent of the crisis and gave way to von Reichenau's arguments. In early December, the Germans relinquished Rostov.

In some confusion, the invaders retreated 30 miles or so westwards, to a winter line behind the Mius River. It was the first major German reverse of the Nazi-Soviet War. Stalin was delighted at these developments and he publicly praised "the victory over the enemy and liberation of Rostov from the German-fascist aggressors".

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Chapter X

The Brutal Conduct of Operation Barbarossa

The method of warfare fought by Hitler's forces in the Soviet Union would, before long, come back to haunt them. By pursuing a conflict in extreme ideological terms against

Russia, it steeled the Red Army's resolve in overcoming the "fascist hordes" at whatever cost.

Hitler had titled his march eastwards "Operation Barbarossa", named after King Frederick Barbarossa, a red-bearded Prussian emperor who centuries before had waged war against the Slavs.

In Soviet territory, Hitler demanded his men undertake "war of annihilation" procedures. These murderous assaults eventually rebounded onto the Germans, who were dealt little mercy as they themselves had shown. By indiscriminately targeting Soviet soldiers and civilians, the Nazis were already sowing the seeds of their own defeat, though they did not yet know it.

A proportion of the USSR's citizens, such as those in the Ukraine, had welcomed the Germans as gallant saviors releasing them at last from Stalin's iron grip. The July and August 1941 arrival onto Ukrainian lands of Hitler's young, undefeated foot soldiers – some golden-haired and many bronzed from the glowing sun – had indeed seduced certain Ukrainian civilians.

As German troops pushed deeper into the lush wheatfields of the Ukraine, growing numbers came forth from country homesteads to warmly greet their apparent rescuers. The ancient offering of bread and salt was graciously provided to Nazi infantrymen, as were flowers.

Joseph Goebbels' propaganda machine was working away seamlessly too. German officers, standing upon platforms in town squares, were handing out large color posters to civilians of an aristocratic-looking Führer, dressed in full military attire, and staring imperiously across his shoulder into the distance. At the bottom of each poster a caption in Ukrainian read, "Hitler the Liberator".

To some in the Ukraine that is how it seemed, in the beginning at least. During that long, fateful summer of 1941, as the world watched on in wonder, it looked like nothing would ever stop the Germans in their advance towards Russia's great cities. From the 22 June attack, after just a week of fighting, the Wehrmacht was already halfway to the capital Moscow. Such news sent Hitler into raptures at his Wolf's Lair headquarters in East Prussia, whose construction had been completed hours before the invasion.

Towards the end of July 1941, following a month of combat, the Nazis had claimed an area double the size of their own country. It was a scale of victory that would have subdued any other European country.

Before too long, however, the severity of Hitler's policies would turn the smiling villagers into wary adversaries of the German Reich. Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, Hitler's right arm during the war years, noted that when the dictator firmly set his mind on a decision, he would follow it through to the end. So it would be in this ideological conflict quickly descending into hatred.

Early in 1941, Hitler had said of the impending Russian attack,

"You have only to kick in the door and the whole rotten structure will come crashing down".

After more than three months of fighting, Hitler [insisted](#) during his Berlin Sportpalast speech

of 3 October 1941 that,

“this enemy [Russia] is already broken and will never rise again”.

The Nazi leader further outlined that his soldiers were,

“fighting on a front of gigantic length and against an enemy who, I must say, does not consist of human beings but of animals or beasts. We have now seen what Bolshevism can make of human beings”.

In the Ukraine, Hitler’s war of ruin served only to swell partisan numbers, while sending floods of Ukrainian men to the ranks of Soviet Armies – millions would inevitably join Stalin’s forces. The Nazi enslavement of countless Ukrainians by turning them into medieval laborers also disillusioned the society, while large-scale murders of the Jewish population drew much horror.



Clockwise from top left: German soldiers advance through Northern Russia, German flamethrower team in the Soviet Union, Soviet planes flying over German positions near Moscow, Soviet prisoners of war on the way to German prison camps, Soviet soldiers fire at German positions. (Licensed under CC BY-SA

3.0)

Had the invasion been conducted through avoidance of these mass killings, such as in the manner of Germany's 1940 offensive against France, it may have weakened the Soviet soldiers' fortitude. Hitler and his followers viewed the French racial composition as of a superior creed, however.

By directing an inhumane warfare in the east, it was impossible for the Nazis to convince local inhabitants theirs was a just motive. Sympathy swept behind the Soviet cause, and even towards Stalin himself, whose Great Purge remained fresh in the memory.

Some short years after the Second World War – across in the Caribbean – a critical factor allowing Cuba's revolutionary, Fidel Castro, to claim power in the heartland of American dominion was the form of warfare he pursued. Castroite forces avoided the depredations of conflict witnessed elsewhere, such as wanton murder and torture. In turn, this clean conduct of battle diluted the fighting desire of Castro's opponents, while bolstering his reputation among the Cuban people.

Of Hitler's troops Castro noted they,

“didn't let any Bolsheviks escape with their lives, and I really don't know how the people in the Soviet resistance might have treated the Nazis who fell prisoner. I don't think they could do what we did [let prisoners go]. If they turned one of those fascists loose, the next day he'd be killing Soviet men, women and children again”.

Castro's units were battling the soldiers of Fulgencio Batista – a corrupt dictator who since 1952 was sustained mostly by American financial might. Despite the rebels being eternally outnumbered against Batista, by the late 1950s they had gathered crucial momentum.

Castro [said his](#) compliance of the laws of war, apart from its ethical aspect, was also,

“a psychological factor of great importance. When an enemy comes to respect and even admire their adversary, you've won a psychological victory... I once said to those who accused us of violating human rights, 'I defy you to find a single case of extra-judicial execution; I defy you to find a single case of torture'... I say to you that no war is ever won through terrorism. It's that simple, because if you employ terrorism you earn the opposition, hatred and rejection of those whom you need in order to win the war. That's why we had the support of over 90% of the population in Cuba”.

In the Soviet Union, however, Hitler's fanaticism failed to recognize the benefits, both moral and emotional, of avoiding arbitrary murder. By engaging in a war of terror, the Nazis delegitimized their purported reason for arriving as “liberators”, which held no basis in reality.

Occasionally, Hitler overcame his ideological mindset by revealing unusual, contradictory viewpoints. On separate instances, he remarked that sections of the Soviet population were racially purer than even that of the Germans.

Even before his attack on Poland, Hitler had said,

“Today the Siberians, the White Russians, and the people of the steppes live extremely healthy lives. For that reason, they are better equipped for development and in the long run biologically superior to the Germans”.

When the war turned in Russia's favor from early 1943 onward, it was an argument Hitler would put forward with growing consistency.

Previously, in late summer 1940, after the Wehrmacht had routed French armies in the west, Hitler predicted to his generals Wilhelm Keitel and Alfred Jodl that, "a campaign against Russia would be child's play".

It was a gross misjudgment of what lay ahead. The triumphs the Nazis had enjoyed, from autumn 1939 to the spring of 1941, cannot have been lost on Hitler as he watched German armies sweep to one easy victory after another. The apparent invulnerability of his soldiers emboldened Hitler, making him reckless and foolhardy. It also set a foundation for complacency.

During Albert Speer's time as the German armaments minister (1942-45), he oversaw a hugely productive war economy; however, by 1943, as Germany's weapons industry soared it was by then too late. Speer lamented that his total war strategies had not been implemented from 1940 – he estimated that, utilizing these policies, the German war machine which attacked Russia could perhaps have been twice larger than it was in 1941.

Almost four million Nazi-led units marched eastwards in June 1941, supported by over 3,000 tanks and up to 5,000 aircraft. The Soviets had much greater numbers of both airplanes and tanks, though many models were at that stage of an inferior quality to their German rivals.

Hitler also allowed himself to be misled by faulty military intelligence underestimating Russian strength; he was swayed too by the Soviets' dismal performance against Finland in the Winter War of 1939. When it came to defending their own soil, the Red Army would be a different proposition.

While Hitler was disregarding Russian capacities, he had forgotten the woes that befell Napoleon during his 1812 invasion of the motherland. The French emperor attacked Russia on 24 June 1812 with almost 700,000 men, then the largest force in history – as early as mid-October 1812 Napoleon was set in retreat, and by December he had lost about 500,000 soldiers. Siberian conditions gnawed away at French hearts, as the Russians fought bitterly, employing scorched earth tactics.

France's invasion of Russia was the Napoleonic Wars' bloodiest battle, a turning point whose outcome weakened French hegemony in Europe, while damaging Napoleon's once infallible reputation. It was a lesson from history that Hitler failed to heed.

Chapter XI

The Battle of Moscow

The heavily decorated panzer commander Hasso von Manteuffel knew Adolf Hitler

reasonably well, having met him on numerous occasions from the summer of 1943 until the spring of 1945.

During their discussions, Manteuffel recognised Hitler's extensive knowledge of military history but, crucially, the German general discerned also the dictator's shortcomings as a commander. Hitler's inadequacies in the military domain were hardly surprising, for he was not really a soldier at all, but a politician, who had no formal military education; unlike Manteuffel who was a renowned strategist.

The American historians Samuel W. Mitcham and Gene Mueller, in their co-authored book 'Hitler's Commanders', outlined the following, "Although Manteuffel was impressed with Hitler's grasp of combat from the field soldier's point of view, as well as the Fuehrer's knowledge of military literature, he recognized Hitler's weaknesses concerning grand strategy and tactical awareness, even though the Fuehrer had a flair for originality and daring. Although he was always respectful, Manteuffel always expressed his own views, regardless of how they might be received by Hitler". (1)

It is no exaggeration to state that the outcome of World War II rested mostly upon Hitler's deficiencies as a military leader – and specifically the decisions made, from June to August 1941, relating to grand strategy in the invasion of the Soviet Union (Operation Barbarossa). The turning point in the war had come over a year before the German defeat at Stalingrad. (2)

Beginning on 22 June 1941 the German-led attack on the USSR, which culminated late that year in the Battle of Moscow, apart from being the most brutal and murderous invasion ever, was by a strategic standpoint deeply flawed. From the start, the Wehrmacht's invasion force of three million German soldiers was sliced up into three Army Groups, which were ordered to capture a number of difficult targets simultaneously (Leningrad, the Ukraine, Moscow, the Crimea, the Caucasus, etc.).

The most important objective by far was the capital city, Moscow, the Soviet Union's biggest metropolis. Almost all roads and railways in the western USSR led irresistibly to the gates of Moscow, like spokes directed into the centre of a wheel (3). If the wheel (Moscow) is put out of action, the rest of the structure cannot function properly. Moscow was the communications hub and power centre of Soviet Russia, where Joseph Stalin and his entourage were headquartered. Stalin himself placed immense store in Moscow's survival.

Stalin asked his famous general, Georgy Zhukov, late in 1941 "with an aching heart" whether "we will hold Moscow?... Tell me honestly, as a Communist" (4). General Zhukov replied to Stalin that Moscow will be held "without fail". Stalin made sure that the road to Moscow was defended whenever possible by large Soviet forces, even when Hitler had turned his attention elsewhere.

Commanded by the 60-year-old Field Marshal Fedor von Bock, Army Group Centre was tasked with capturing the Russian capital. Hitler's criminal intentions regarding Moscow were clear, as he remarked on the night of 5 July 1941, "Moscow, as the center of the doctrine [Bolshevism], must disappear from the earth's surface as soon as its riches have been brought to shelter. There's no question of our collaborating with the Muscovite proletariat". (5)

From 22 June 1941, had Army Group Centre been directed in a single great thrust towards

Moscow, and in doing so protected by Army Group North and Army Group South acting as flank guards, the German Army could well have taken Moscow by the end of August 1941 (6). Top level German commanders like Franz Halder, Heinz Guderian and von Bock recognised Moscow's importance. Were the capital to fall, the Soviet rail and communications systems would have been shattered. With their centre blown apart, this would have posed enormous difficulties for the Red Army in supplying and bolstering their northern and southern fronts.



German armored column advances on the Moscow front, October 1941 (Licensed under Public Domain)

General Halder stated in a memorandum, of 18 August 1941, that the bulk of the Red Army was being massed in front of Moscow for its defence. If these Soviet divisions were defeated "the Russians would no longer be able to maintain a joined-up defensive front", Halder wrote. (7)

It is necessary to stress that the Soviet military was not ready for war with Nazi Germany in mid-1941. However, the damage inflicted by Stalin's purges on the Red Army, from 1937, has routinely been blown out of proportion in the West.

Experienced British scholar Evan Mawdsley, a specialist in Russian history, noted correctly how "The Red Army commanders who were executed were not proven military leaders" in mechanised warfare and "Many able middle-level commanders survived the purges"; but he acknowledged too that "the execution of even a few hundred officers would be a traumatic event in any army" and this "was particularly devastating at the uppermost levels". (8)

Considerable harm was caused then but it was far from fatal, which events would show, as the Red Army boasted top class commanders such as Zhukov, Konstantin Rokossovsky and Aleksandr Vasilevsky. The Soviet military reforms were not close to completion by June 1941, debunking the right-wing fantasy that Stalin was then preparing an attack on Germany. Stalin knew that the conflict with Nazism was approaching, but he hoped to put it off until 1942 or later; Stalin's close associate Vyacheslav Molotov recalled the former saying shortly after the Fall of France, "we would be able to confront the Germans on an equal basis only by 1943". (9)

The Germans, therefore, had a huge advantage as they attacked an ill-prepared and static Soviet military in June 1941. By the first week of July 1941 for example, nearly 4,000 Soviet aircraft were destroyed, most of them on the ground (10). Yet with Operation Barbarossa's strategic design of attacking the entirety of the western USSR at once, the strength of the Nazi blow was ultimately diluted. The Russians were given time to recover, and to their credit they did not collapse like the French the year before.

Two months into the invasion, on 21 August 1941 Hitler compounded the early strategic errors of Barbarossa, by fatefully postponing the advance on Moscow. Mitcham and Mueller describe this decision as "one of the greatest mistakes of the war" as the Soviets' "most important city [Moscow]" was demoted to secondary stature (11). Hitler ordered that the Wehrmacht instead take the Crimea, the Donbas and the Caucasus while he also demanded "the investment of Leningrad and the linking up with the Finns".

Three days before, on 18 August 1941, the German high command (OKH) had issued a request for the capture of Moscow post haste, but Hitler replied that "The army's suggestion for continuing operations in the east does not conform to my intentions" (12). It was to the Wehrmacht's detriment that Hitler, through his force of personality, had succeeded in gaining complete control over all German military operations. With these new orders of 21 August 1941, Nazi Germany's defeat in the Second World War was assured. (13)

Donald J. Goodspeed, a military historian who had fought against the Nazi empire with the Canadian Army Overseas, wrote of Hitler's 21 August directive,

"Thus a clear-cut, feasible, and single military objective [capturing Moscow] was set aside, and for it was substituted a double-headed monstrosity. Hitler was greedy and saw too many things at once. Army Group Center was to be halted, immobile, around Smolensk [240 miles west of Moscow], while rich new territories were to be taken in the south and Leningrad was to be eliminated in the north. Nor was it only that a double objective had been substituted for a single one. In the south Hitler wanted the Crimea, the Donbas and the Caucasus; in the north he wanted both Leningrad and the Karelian Isthmus". (14)

In late August 1941, Army Group Centre was stripped of its armour which was sent south to the Ukraine. The march into the Ukraine did result in a major German victory as its capital Kiev, the USSR's third largest city, fell to a giant pincers movement on 19 September 1941. Stalin ignored the advice of among others Zhukov, who had sensed impending danger weeks before by warning on 29 July 1941, "the Red Army should withdraw to the east of the Dnepr river". (15)



Moscow women dig anti-tank trenches around their city in 1941 (Licensed under Public Domain)

Around Kiev by 26 September 1941, no less than 665,000 Soviet troops were caught within the German pincers and taken prisoner, the biggest surrender of forces in military history. The Soviet prisoners of war (POWs) now had to face the horrors of Nazi captivity.

Mawdsley, in his lengthy analysis of the Nazi-Soviet War, wrote that "In terms of scale, the fatalities among Red Army POWs were second only to the mass murder of the European Jews. Although an important part of the charges at the Nuremberg Trials, the story was far less prominent in the Cold War years. A quarter to a third of all the USSR's 10 million military deaths were soldiers who died in captivity. The exact figure can never be calculated, but the most commonly accepted German figure is 3,300,300 Soviet POWs dying in captivity, some 58% of the 5,700,000 taken prisoner. The Russians accept a lower figure of Red Army POWs, 4,559,000, and 2,500,000 deaths, but with a similar death rate of 55%". (16)

Dreadful as the loss of Kiev ranked, September was almost gone and the worst of autumn was closing in fast. The German Army, along with its panzer divisions, was weakened by the hundreds of miles they traversed in the Ukraine. Hitler had issued Directive No. 35 on 6 September 1941, belatedly assigning Moscow as the next principal target. When the Wehrmacht's claws closed around Kiev on 14 September, the German high command began to reinforce Army Group Centre.

Field Marshal von Bock, leading Army Group Centre, would soon have more than 1.5 million men under his command. Despite efficient German staff work, it was 26 September 1941 before final orders could be relayed for the assault on Moscow, and not until six days later did the offensive begin, hopefully titled Operation Typhoon. Hitler's interference had resulted in a critical six week delay.

On 2 October 1941, as the Battle of Moscow commenced, it seemed to many outside observers that the Germans would yet prevail. The weather, overall, held good for the time being and the countryside was relatively flat and open, suitable terrain for the panzer

formations. During the first three weeks of October 1941, an incredible 86 Soviet divisions were destroyed. Army Group Centre captured 663,000 Soviet soldiers and eradicated 1,200 enemy tanks. The English historian, Geoffrey Roberts, wrote that total Soviet personnel losses in the opening phase of October “numbered a million, including nearly 700,000 captured by the Germans”. (17)

Most of the damage done to the Red Army here came in another massive pincers manoeuvre, which the Germans implemented around the medieval Russian towns of Vyazma and Bryansk, 150 miles apart. The northern pincer at Vyazma was the more effective, as five Russian armies were trapped and annihilated by 13 October 1941. The ring was not so tightly held at the southern pincer around Bryansk, where three Russian armies were caught and wiped out.



German soldiers west of Moscow, December 1941 (Licensed under CC BY 3.0)

Roberts highlighted that, “The encirclements were a devastating blow to the Bryansk, Western and Reserve fronts defending the approaches to Moscow” (18). When the Wehrmacht reached Vyazma on 7 October 1941, they were less than 140 miles from Moscow. On that day, the first snow flurries arrived in western Russia, an ill omen for the lightly-dressed Germans and their Axis allies, such as the Romanians and Italians. The snow was not heavy and quickly disappeared.

On 5 October 1941, the Soviet cause had been given a significant boost, when Stalin telephoned General Zhukov in Leningrad and asked him “can you board a plane and come to Moscow?” Zhukov was being designated with leading the defence of the capital. Zhukov agreed by replying, “I ask for permission to fly out tomorrow morning at dawn” and Stalin said, “Very well. We await your arrival in Moscow tomorrow”. (19)

For now, there was only so much that Zhukov could do. On 12 October 1941 Army Group Centre stormed the Russian city of Kaluga, 93 miles south-west of Moscow (20). A week later, 19 October, the Germans occupied the abandoned town of Mozhaysk, just 65 miles west of Moscow. The road apparently lay open and panic started to grip the capital. It is little

wonder that Zhukov considered the dates, between the 10th to the 20th of October 1941, as “the most dangerous moment for the Red Army” in the entire war. (21)

Notes

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Chapter XII

The Battle of Moscow, Soviet Counterattack

As the Battle of Moscow began eight decades ago on 2 October 1941, the weeks directly preceding and following this date did not seem to augur well for the Soviet Army. Kiev, the USSR's third largest city, fell two weeks before on 19 September to a vast German pincers movement, and the Red Army lost a staggering 665,000 troops in the process.

Titled Operation Typhoon, the German plan for the capture of Moscow called for a two-stage battle. In the first phase German Army Group Centre, comprising of almost two million men (1), would execute a three-pronged attack; with the German 9th Army and Panzer Group 3 advancing to the north between the towns of Vyazma and Rzhev, both 140 miles west of Moscow.

The German 4th Army, and Panzer Group 4, would drive forward along the Roslavl-Moscow road in the centre; and Heinz Guderian's Panzer Group 2, now called the 2nd Panzer Army, would attack to the south between Bryansk and Orel to the city of Tula, 110 miles southward of Moscow. Operation Typhoon's second phase envisaged the final advance on the Russian capital, conducted by two armoured encircling thrusts from the north-west and the south-east.

The weather and terrain suited the Wehrmacht, for the time being. In the first three weeks of October 1941, the Germans captured another 663,000 Soviet soldiers and destroyed 1,200 tanks. Including casualties and prisoners taken, total Red Army losses in the opening stage of October amounted to a million troops (2). In a four week period from 19 September 1941, the Soviets had altogether lost more than 1.6 million men.

Even these terrible reverses did not prove insurmountable to a state whose populace, in 1941, amounted to around 193 million (3), as opposed to a population in Germany and Nazi-occupied Europe of about 110 million.

On 15 October 1941, Joseph Stalin ordered the majority of Soviet government officials to leave Moscow. They relocated 560 miles further east to the city of Kuibyshev on the Volga river. This indicates that the Soviet leadership was not confident that Moscow could be held. Stalin gloomily informed Harry Hopkins, president Franklin Roosevelt's personal emissary, that if Moscow was lost "all of Russia west of the Volga would have to be abandoned" (4). Nevertheless, Stalin remained in Moscow, believing that his continued presence there would maintain morale and prevent widespread unrest among Muscovites, clearly the correct decision.

While the Wehrmacht closed on Moscow, the Red Army's resistance appeared to be weakening. On 19 October 1941 the Germans took the abandoned town of Mozhaysk, 65 miles west of Moscow. The following day, Stalin declared martial law as the capital was

placed under full military control.



Red Army ski troops in Moscow. Still from documentary *Moscow Strikes Back*, 1942 (Licensed under CC0)

On 23 October 1941 the Germans crossed the Narva river, and were only 40 miles from Moscow (5). During the next day, however, the famous Russian rainfall (*rasputitsa*) arrived almost providentially. The Germans were expecting rains to come but the ferocity of it was a shock to them. The unpaved roads and paths quickly turned into rivers of thick, congealed mud. This meant that no wheeled vehicle could move for consecutive days, and the larger panzers advanced at a snail's pace. The wider-tracked Russian T-34 tanks were more suited to such conditions.

British scholar Evan Mawdsley wrote,

“The defence of Moscow was certainly helped by changes in the weather” and “Unlike the Germans, the Russians had a working railway system behind their front line. Soviet planes were operating from prepared airfields, while the Luftwaffe now had to make do with improvised muddy landing strips”. (6)

By 24 October 1941 as the rains came, the German invasion was four months old (17 weeks) and in serious difficulty. Adolf Hitler had previously expected to conquer the Soviet Union in less than half of that time (8 weeks). When France collapsed the Nazi leader told his military advisers Wilhelm Keitel and Alfred Jodl that “a campaign against Russia would be child's play” (7). Field Marshal Keitel, often accused of being a lackey, disagreed and he was opposed to attacking the USSR.

The German High Command (OKH) predicted in mid-December 1940 that “the Soviet Union would be defeated in a campaign not exceeding 8-10 weeks”. Such views were strongly shared by the American and British authorities. Why did these predictions prove so wrong?

We can get to the heart of the matter, by briefly examining German blunders regarding grand strategy and, with it, the most important reason: Hitler's directive of 21 August 1941, that led to a crucial six week postponement in the march on Moscow (21 August-2 October). This came against the wishes of the Wehrmacht's leadership, who desperately wanted the advance towards Moscow to continue. By the last week of August, Army Group Centre was 185 miles from Moscow, not a great distance by any means. (8)

The capital city was the USSR's most important metropolis, its power centre and communications line (9). Had it fallen in the autumn of 1941, the repercussions would most probably have been fatal for the Soviets.

English historian Andrew Roberts observed, "Moscow was the nodal point of Russia's north-south transport hub, was the administrative and political capital, was vital for Russian morale and was an important industrial centre in its own right" (10). As a transportation and administrative hub, Moscow performed a central role in the Red Army's ability to supply other parts of its front. On 21 August 1941 at his Wolfsschanze headquarters in the East Prussian forests, Hitler put aside one critical objective (Moscow), and substituted it with five targets of lesser importance.

Hitler expounded that they would instead pursue "the capture of the Crimea" and "the industrial and coal mining area of the Donets" along with "the cutting off of Russian oil supplies from the Caucasus" and "the investment of Leningrad and the linking up with the Finns". When on 22 August Hitler's orders were forwarded to Field Marshal Fedor von Bock, commanding Army Group Centre and a very experienced officer, he telephoned General Franz Halder and said it was "unfortunate, above all because it placed the attack to the east in question... I want to smash the enemy army and the bulk of this army is opposite my front!" (11)

Von Bock, a monarchist who did not like the Nazis, continued that diverting forces away from the attack on Moscow "will jeopardize the execution of the main operation, namely the destruction of the Russian armed forces before winter". Halder, a key planner in Operation Barbarossa's original design, agreed with him. Two days later on 24 August 1941 von Bock reiterated, "They apparently do not wish to exploit under any circumstances the opportunity decisively to defeat the Russians before winter!" (12)

One can note the normally dour von Bock's use of exclamation marks, as he believes the chance for victory has been taken away from him. Insult was added to injury, as von Bock was compelled to release four of his five panzer corps, and three infantry corps, for the southward and northwards assaults on the Ukraine and Leningrad. Halder felt that Hitler's directive of 21 August "was decisive to the outcome of this campaign". (13)

For reasons of megalomania, Hitler had overruled his military commanders on a pivotal military issue. American historians Samuel W. Mitcham and Gene Mueller summarised that Hitler's 21 August directive "was one of the greatest mistakes of the war" (14). It came on top of the opening strategic errors of 22 June 1941, when the Wehrmacht attacked all of the western USSR simultaneously, ultimately weakening the Nazi blow. Fortunately, the Third Reich's leadership was strategically inept.

In late August 1941, the German Armed Forces High Command (OKW) were contemplating that the war in the east would drag on until 1942 (15). An early knockout strike had not materialised, and the Soviet Army was fighting with tenacity; while the Russians possessed

military hardware of a high standard, like the Katyusha rocket launcher (Stalin's Organ) and the T-34 tank, which came as a real surprise to the Germans. (16)

An OKW memorandum from 27 August ran, "if it proves impossible to realise this objective completely [the USSR's destruction] during 1941, the continuation of the eastern campaign has top priority for 1942" (17). Hitler approved the memo, which suggests that he was starting to think the invasion may not be successfully concluded in 1941. Hitler certainly believed this by November of that year.

The Soviet cause was given a major lift when, on 10 October 1941, Stalin officially granted General Georgy Zhukov the leadership over the majority of Red Army divisions (the Western Front and Reserve Front) for the capital's defence. The 44-year-old Zhukov was an extremely able, energetic, self-confident and ruthless commander, just the sort of man that was needed.

Zhukov pursued a policy of initiating incessant counterattacks, and then withdrawing at the final moment. These tactics succeeded in wearing down the belated German march on Moscow (18). More than any other soldier in the war, Zhukov would play a leading part in the Nazis' demise. Andrei Gromyko, a prominent Soviet diplomat, wrote that Zhukov was "the jewel in the crown of the Soviet people's greatest victory". (19)

At the beginning of November 1941 victory was not yet assured, for the rains disappeared and frost set in. The ground had hardened enough for the panzers to begin rolling again. These colder temperatures were uncomfortable for the German troops, who incredibly were still not supplied with sufficient winter clothing, but the temperature hovered around zero for now and was not unbearable.

In preceding weeks, the Kremlin received intelligence reports from their spy in Tokyo, Dr. Richard Sorge, and also from Soviet agencies, which stated that Imperial Japan was not preparing an immediate attack on the eastern USSR. This time Stalin believed the intelligence accounts and, in the first fortnight of November 1941, he transferred 21 fresh divisions from Siberia and Central Asia to the Moscow front. (20)

The Germans had no such reserve of men to call upon. On the night of 11 November 1941, the temperature dropped suddenly to minus 20 degrees Celsius. Frostbite cases were becoming common among German soldiers, but the Wehrmacht resumed advancing from 15 November. A week later, on 22 November the medieval town of Klin fell, 52 miles north-west of Moscow. (21)

The following day, Panzer Group 4 took Solnechnogorsk, 38 miles from Moscow. On 27 November the 7th Panzer Division established a bridgehead across the Moscow-Volga Canal. Also during 27 November, the 2nd SS Panzer Division Das Reich captured the town of Istra, just 31 miles west of Moscow.

German professor Jörg Ganzenmüller wrote that Hitler now formulated "a special order", which was sent to SS major Otto Skorzeny of the Das Reich division. Hitler demanded that Skorzeny and his men occupy the locks of the reservoir on the Moscow-Volga canal, and then open the locks so as to "drown" Moscow by turning it into a massive artificial lake (22). These orders were obviously never carried out, due to Skorzeny's unit being unable to advance much further.

In late November 1941, it was apparent that the German offensive would likely fail. As of 26 November, the Germans had lost 743,112 men on the Eastern front (23). This number does not include frostbite casualties and other soldiers absent due to illness.

Because of ongoing Russian resistance and their fresh resources – which in both cases had been much greater than the Germans anticipated – General Guderian's panzers had failed to reach the city of Tula, just over 100 miles south of Moscow. Panzer Group 3, which captured the line of the Moscow-Volga Canal on 28 November, could attack no further; and while a division from Panzer Group 4 had proceeded to within 18 miles of Moscow, continued progress for them proved impossible.

On 2 December 1941, a motorcycle reconnaissance unit of the 2nd Panzer Division reached the suburb of Khimki, five miles from Moscow and nine miles from the Kremlin. Isolated, it did not remain for long in this forward position (24). That was as close as the Germans ever got to the spires of Moscow.

On the night of 4 December, the temperature plummeted again to minus 31 degrees Celsius. Twenty four hours later, it sank to minus 36 degrees (25). It was clear that Operation Barbarossa had failed and worse was in store for the Germans. If they could not accomplish the USSR's overthrow in 1941, they could hardly expect to do so in a weaker condition in 1942.

The writing was on the wall on 5 December 1941, as the Soviet Army counterattacked the static and precariously positioned Germans, by striking Panzer Group 3 near the Moscow-Volga Canal, along with the German 9th Army at the city of Kalinin. The next day, 6 December, General Zhukov's divisions launched an assault on the 2nd Panzer Army south of Moscow, with both sides suffering serious losses. Yet Zhukov prevailed by forcing the 2nd Panzer Army to retreat over 50 miles.

Field Marshal von Bock, irate at these setbacks, wrote in his diary, "Last August, the road to Moscow was open; we could have entered the Bolshevik capital in triumph and in summery weather. The high military leadership of the Fatherland made a terrible mistake, when it forced my Army Group to adopt a position of defence last August. Now all of us are paying for that mistake". (26)

In winter weather, the Soviets were a superior fighting force in comparison to the enemy. Soviet divisions were better equipped and had much more experience of adverse conditions. Stalin said shortly after the Red Army subdued Finland in March 1940, "It is not true that the army's fighting capacity decreases in wintertime. All the Russian Army's major victories were won in wintertime... We are a northern country". (27)

With the Soviets continually counterattacking, one must give the Germans substantial credit for managing somehow to avoid a total collapse, which is what had befallen Napoleon's army in Russia in late 1812. Hitler refused to allow a general retreat, as he ordered on 16 December 1941 that each German soldier display "fanatical resistance".

By the end of December 1941, the Russians had advanced 100 to 150 miles across a broad front (28). The Red Army did not achieve a truly decisive breakthrough and the fighting would continue into 1942, and indeed well beyond that.

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Chapter XIII

Consequences of the November 1941 Orsha Conference

On 13 November 1941 a significant conference was convened in Nazi-occupied Belarus, at the city of Orsha, in order to decide whether the Wehrmacht should resume its advance on Moscow, or go over to the defence for the winter.

The German Army Group North and Army Group South commanders, Ritter von Leeb and Gerd von Rundstedt, both wanted to switch to a solid defensive line, and thereby rest on the territorial gains made against the USSR up until mid-November 1941. Hindsight is useful but their views were undoubtedly correct.

Field Marshal von Leeb, who had no fondness for the Nazis being a staunch monarchist and catholic, was also considered a world authority on defensive warfare, and his opinion should especially have been heeded. Some of von Leeb's early writings on defensive warfare were translated into Russian, and had even been incorporated into the Soviet Army's Field Service regulations of 1936, according to Samuel W. Mitcham, the American military historian. Von Leeb himself believed, "Defence is mostly the necessary recourse of distress; the defenders are nearly always in a critical position".

Already on the night of 11 November, the temperature just west of Moscow had dropped to minus 20 degrees Celsius. Because of Nazi arrogance and negligence, Wehrmacht troops were not furnished with winter clothing, nor did they have basic medical and military supplies. They were in no condition to fight a winter war that could succeed. Some German soldiers resorted to stealing the felt boots, fur caps and long great coats from dead Russian troops. Regardless, more and more Germans were exiting the battlefield due to frostbite, severe cases of which were first recorded on 7 November 1941.

The Army Group Center commander, Fedor von Bock, had a different opinion to von Leeb and von Rundstedt. Army Group Center was tasked with capturing Moscow and bringing the

war to a successful conclusion. Driven by personal ambition and his hope that the Russians were almost finished, Field Marshal von Bock, ignoring the fierce weather and weakened state of his army, insisted that the march towards Moscow should continue.

Adolf Hitler supported this stance. As did the Army High Command Chief-of-Staff Franz Halder, who said at the Orsha meeting that “the enemy is worse off than we are; he is on the verge of collapse”.

Hitler, Halder and von Bock were influenced too by recollections of the First World War. Haunting the Orsha conference like a ghost was the German memory of the September 1914 Battle of the Marne which, it is no exaggeration to say, cost the German Empire victory in World War I. During the Battle of the Marne in northern France, possible German success was thrown away due to a lack of resolution. Though the past usually has lessons to teach, they can be misunderstood, and the similarities are few between the Battle of the Marne and the German position in the late stages of Operation Barbarossa.

It was agreed, therefore, that the advance on Moscow would resume, as it did on 15 November 1941. In awful conditions the Germans struggled forward, pushing Soviet forces back to the Volga Reservoir, about 75 miles north of Moscow. On 22 November Panzer Group 3 entered Klin and promptly captured it, 52 miles from Moscow. On 24 November the town of Solnechnogorsk fell, 38 miles north-west of the Russian capital.

On 27 November 1941 the 7th panzer division formed a bridgehead over the Moscow-Volga Canal; and also on 27 November, the 2nd SS panzer division Das Reich captured Istra, a mere 31 miles from Moscow. However, as of 26 November the Germans had suffered 743,122 casualties; taking into account illnesses and those unavailable through frostbite, the number would slightly exceed 750,000 German casualties in early December 1941. This total is obviously high but, in comparison, Red Army casualties amounted to almost 5 million by the end of 1941, more than 6 times greater than German losses.

In late November 1941, it was becoming clear that the possibility of the Germans capturing Moscow was a slim one. During the first two weeks of November, Joseph Stalin had dispatched 21 fresh Soviet divisions from Siberia and Central Asia to the Moscow sector. Before on 5 October 1941, Stalin had decided to create a strategic reserve of 10 armies, most of which were retained for the counter-offensive that was soon to come. The Germans had barely any new divisions to throw into the fighting. The weakened Luftwaffe previously failed to eliminate the Trans-Siberian rail line, across which the fresh reserves of Soviet troops had been transported.

On 28 November 1941, Panzer Group 3 established a foothold over the Moscow-Volga Canal, but it could proceed no further. Over 100 miles to the south of Moscow, the 2nd Panzer Army was unable to capture the city of Tula. This meant that the planned German pincers envelopment of Moscow, from the south-east and the north-west, could not now be implemented. In the first week of December 1941, Panzer Group 4 pushed a division to within 18 miles of Moscow but it was halted by Soviet resistance.

With a last throw of the dice Hitler decided, as Moscow could not be taken by encirclement, that he would wipe the city out by flooding it with water. Hitler compiled an order that was sent to the 33-year-old SS Obersturmfuehrer Otto Skorzeny, who would become one of the most famous – or infamous – soldiers of the war. Hitler’s order expounded that Skorzeny’s unit, belonging to the Das Reich panzer division, should advance to capture the sluices of

the reservoir on the Moscow-Volga Canal. They would thereafter open the sluices and “drown” Moscow by turning it into a gigantic artificial lake.

By the start of December 1941 Skorzeny and his men, though they could see the spires of Moscow and the Kremlin in their binoculars, were waist deep in snow and could not advance to carry out Hitler’s order. Skorzeny complained how “in spite of the confusion of our logistics and in spite of the bravery of the Russian soldiers, we would have taken Moscow in the beginning of December 1941 if the Siberian troops had not intervened. In the month of December, our Army Group Center did not receive a single division as reinforcement or replacement”.

Image on the right: Nazi Germany invading the Soviet Union in Operation Barbarossa, June 22, 1941.
Source: *Contunico* © ZDF Enterprises GmbH, Mainz



On the night of 4 December, the temperature near Moscow plunged to minus 31 degrees Celsius and, 24 hours later, the thermometer sank lower still to minus 36. The German soldiers were fighting desperately in the evergreen woods that lay around Moscow, and further progress was impossible. With this halt the truth suddenly hit home.

Army Group Center’s final effort to take Moscow had failed, and the failure left it in a most dangerous position. They were holding a front around 600 miles in breadth, and against an enemy which, though it had suffered unprecedented losses, seemed if anything to be growing stronger. The Soviet counter-attack was launched on 5 December 1941, timed beautifully to strike the Germans at their weakest moment.

For all of the vast extent of front, von Bock’s army had in reserve a single, understrength division. This was military redundancy, the result of German overconfidence along with Hitler and the high command’s willingness to gamble recklessly. Like players who continually doubled their stakes, they faced ruin should the dice fall the wrong way.

With the temperature below minus 30, the panzers and trucks were becoming immobile because the oil in their sumps was freezing solid, and the Germans had very little antifreeze. Their horses were dying from the cold, and the Wehrmacht was still heavily reliant on these animals for transportation. Even the lubricating oil in guns and other weaponry was starting to freeze, rendering them unserviceable. Out of the 26 trains per day, which the German logistics staff calculated were necessary to maintain Army Group Center, only eight to 10 trains were arriving every 24 hours.

So much for the successful eight week campaign envisaged in Barbarossa’s planning. From the German viewpoint, the invasion could only be regarded as a monumental failure. The objective had been to secure a 1,300 mile line from Archangel, in the far north-west of

Russia, to the Caspian Sea – running eastwards of Moscow and including nearly all of European Russia. As December 1941 began, the reality was that the depleted German divisions stood outside of Moscow and Leningrad, Soviet Russia's two largest cities; while to the south, German forces were stopped 300 miles west of the Caspian Sea. Neither had the Caucasus region been penetrated, following the German retirement from Rostov-on-Don on 2 December.

What were the reasons for the inability to accomplish any of these aims? No single cause can be put forward but some are more important than others. Barbarossa's strategic planning was inadequate and amateurish. It called for an offensive across an extremely broad front, which served to dilute the force of the attack, and give the Soviet Army time to recover from the opening blows. With Hitler's mark all over it, the German high command had attempted to reach too many targets at the same time (Leningrad, Crimea, Caucasus, Murmansk, Kiev, Moscow, Donbass).

Mitcham observed, "By sending them racing all over Russia, Hitler had contributed greatly to the wear on his panzers. Tank units had less than 50 percent of their authorized strength when Operation Typhoon, the final drive on Moscow, began".

Moscow ranked as Soviet Russia's most important city. Apart from being the USSR's biggest urban area, the capital was its communications, transportation and administrative hub, which enabled each part of the Soviet Army front to be reinforced. Moscow was a vital industrial center and it headquartered the country's all powerful leader, Stalin.

From the invasion's outset on 22 June 1941, had Army Group Center been directed towards Moscow in a single great thrust – and protected on the flanks by Army Groups North and South – the capital may well have fallen at the end of August 1941. Such strategic thoughts were beyond the Nazi hierarchy, luckily for the world. Two months into the invasion, on 21 August, previous strategic mistakes could have been rectified by assigning Moscow primary importance on that date; but Hitler compounded the errors by reasserting the plan to capture numerous objectives. The advance on Moscow was postponed for what would be a critical six weeks (until 2 October 1941).

When Hitler's orders of 21 August were forwarded by telephone on 22 August to Field Marshal von Bock, whose goal had been to capture Moscow, he was very upset. He said it was "unfortunate... All the directives say taking Moscow isn't important!!... I want to smash the enemy army and the bulk of this army is opposite my front!" On 24 August von Bock continued, "They apparently do not wish to exploit under any circumstances the opportunity decisively to defeat the Russians before winter!"

Note the repeated use of exclamation marks by von Bock, a normally cold and unemotional Prussian not given to hysterics. His views here would prove accurate in every sense. General Halder went so far as to say that Hitler's 21 August directive "was decisive to the outcome of this campaign"; and in December 1941 von Bock, having seen his prediction come true, again lambasted the 21 August directive, calling it "a terrible mistake".

There were some other factors, perhaps secondary, behind the German failure. Russian resistance, military capacity, and resources were much greater than the Nazis had anticipated. Overall, the quality of Soviet military hardware was impressive, in particular the T-34 medium tank and KV heavy tank. Yet in 1941 there were, combined, only about 2,000 T-34 and KV tanks available to the Soviets, and most of these had been destroyed before

winter by the enemy.

British historian Evan Mawdsley wrote, “In 1941 the Germans were able to cope with the superior number of Soviet tanks, by means of some excellent towed anti-tank guns. The 88mm, which was actually a heavy anti-aircraft gun, gave the Wehrmacht the firepower to knock out even the T-34 and KV”. Consequently, the high standard of Soviet armour, in some instances superior to the German, was not a decisive factor in 1941 when the crucial fighting was unfolding.

The Nazis faced increased resistance, at least in part because of the brutality of their rule in the conquered regions. In the Ukraine, for example, the Wehrmacht had initially been welcomed as liberators by a considerable part of the population. Before long, potential allies would evolve into implacable enemies when the true face of Nazi occupation was revealed, and this certainly did not help the Wehrmacht’s cause.

The size of the Soviet landmass, far larger than western Europe where the Germans were triumphant the year before, is a sometimes overlooked factor in Barbarossa’s failure but it was important. The terrain’s vastness was enhanced by German strategic blunders. The Soviet road network was much inferior when compared to the road system in France. This proved a hindrance to the Germans, especially when the heavy rains arrived in the second half of October 1941, turning the ground into rivers of mud.

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Chapter XIV

Analysis of Germany's 1942 Offensive

Three-quarters of a century ago, on 21 April 1945 the Soviet Army had encircled Berlin and was unleashing its final attack upon Nazi Germany.

With the Germans having killed more than 10 million Soviet troops since their June 1941 invasion, the last remnants of the Wehrmacht and SS were still vastly outnumbered in their defence of Berlin. Soviet ruler Joseph Stalin, on the cusp of celebrating his most important triumph, amassed around 2.5 million Red Army soldiers for this assault on the German capital, supported by over 6,000 tanks and 7,500 aircraft. (1)

For the Battle of Berlin, Stalin's old nemesis Adolf Hitler managed to gather almost a million troops, but a proportion of them had seen too many winters, or too few. The cream of German armies had either been wiped out by the Soviets over preceding month and years, or were in captivity. By 16 April 1945, the Red Army began their assault towards Berlin, with a massive artillery bombardment on the German defences along the Oder-Neisse river line.



Raising a Flag over the Reichstag, a photograph taken during the Battle of Berlin on 2 May 1945
(Source: Wikimedia Commons)

The previous day – 15 April 1945 – Hitler, dressed in full military attire, emerged in the morning from the cramped, overcharged atmosphere of the Führerbunker. Stepping outside into the fresh spring air, he looked about at his surroundings. Everything was still and quiet, the sky clear. Hitler walked the short distance from the Führerbunker to the Reich Chancellory, and he was joined by Hans Baur, his personal pilot since early 1932. During the 1920s, Baur was one of Germany's most renowned commercial pilots, earning a variety of awards and recognition from the Weimar government.

Writing in his memoirs originally published in 1956, Baur recalled how,

“Hitler had personally taken charge of the defence of the Reich Chancellory, and on 15 April [1945] – it was a beautiful sunny day – he appeared in the garden to give various instructions... A thousand men of his Leibstandarte under the command of General Mohnke were there to defend Hitler’s last stronghold to the end”. (2)

With the Soviets closing in, Hitler rejected the pleas of underlings urging him to flee southwards towards Bavaria. Captain and crew would go down with the ship together. Apart from the Leibstandarte, very few remained in this area during the final days. Even SS commando Otto Skorzeny, the saviour of Benito Mussolini 18 months before and one of Hitler’s favourite soldiers, had since left.

Hitler saw Skorzeny for the last time in the Reich Chancellory in late March 1945, when the Nazi leader awarded him the prestigious Oak Leaves to the Knight’s Cross. Skorzeny got out of Berlin while he could. On 12 April 1945 he was present in Linz, the Austrian town where Hitler spent most of his youth and had planned to remodel. By 15 April Skorzeny moved on and “was drawing up plans for a full-scale guerrilla war should conventional methods fail to halt the Allies”, according to Skorzeny’s recent biographer, English historian Stuart Smith. (3)

That same day, standing outside the Führerbunker on 15 April 1945, Hitler inspected the defences of the Reich Chancellory perimeter. He then made his way into the Reich Chancellory itself, one of the very few large buildings standing in Berlin.

Suddenly appearing in the Reich Chancellory was Magda Goebbels, wife of propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels. Shocked to see her at this late date Hitler said,

“For heaven’s sake Frau Goebbels, what are you doing here in Berlin? You should have gone away long ago. Baur here will fly you to the Berghof whilst there’s still time. You will be safe there with your children”. (4)

Magda Goebbels protested and Hitler’s orders were refused, for once. Instead she saw fit to remain in Berlin to die – before killing herself, she would allow her six children to be poisoned with cyanide as they slept in their beds, drugged with morphine.

Hitler had not foreseen the catastrophe that was engulfing his empire. Only two and a half years before, he was convinced that the Russians were finished. It appeared that way to many at the time. During the summer and early autumn of 1942, this was the period of the great German advance into far-eastern Ukraine, southern Russia and the Caucasus: principally towards the Russian cities of Stalingrad and Astrakhan, along with another drive further south to capture Baku, the capital of energy rich Azerbaijan, or so it was hoped. As Hitler knew, Baku was dripping in oil. This city provided 80% of the oil consumed by the Soviet war machine (5). Taking Baku would constitute a hammer blow to the Soviets.

Reminiscing on developments, the Nazi war minister Albert Speer acknowledged that by August 1942 “there actually no longer seemed to be any resistance to Hitler left in Europe” (6). It should be recognised that, from the summer of 1942, this German advance hundreds of miles into the western and southern Soviet Union was one of the most incredible feats in military history. During Napoleon’s invasion of Russia 130 years before, he was simply unable to progress as far as this, failing to survive the winter even.

Nevertheless the Wehrmacht could not replenish the casualties they suffered from June 1941. In the first six months of their invasion of the USSR, the Germans lost more than 900,000 men, along with being shorn of 6,000 aircraft and over 3,200 panzers and other armoured vehicles. Most German troops partaking in the 1942 offensive, had been involved from the start of Operation Barbarossa the year before.

Jacques R. Pauwels, the veteran Belgian-born historian, wrote that German forces “available for a push toward the oil fields of the Caucasus were therefore extremely limited. Under those circumstances, it is quite remarkable that in 1942 the Germans managed to make it as far as they did”. (7)

The Soviet Union, with almost twice the population of Nazi-occupied Europe, was able to replace much of their losses relating to manpower. The Soviets could also count on their greater industrial strength, and the bigger quantities of raw materials at their disposal.

It can be recalled that large-scale German victories were achieved in the early summer of 1942 – before Hitler’s offensive eastwards, Case Blue, had gained a head of steam in the high summer. Beginning on 12 May 1942, a huge clash unfolded in eastern Ukraine, known as the Second Battle of Kharkov. This city, Kharkov, was the Soviet Union’s third largest metropolis.

At the commencement of fighting in Kharkov, which the Soviets initiated, the Germans and their Axis partners were outnumbered on the ground by more than two to one. However, during the next fortnight, the Wehrmacht inflicted over 200,000 fatalities on the Soviets, along with the capturing of up to 240,000 Red Army soldiers. By comparison, the Axis powers lost less than 30,000 men in the Second Battle of Kharkov, and the city was taken by German-led forces on 28 May 1942.

Five weeks later, on 4 July 1942, the Crimea was in German hands, after they finally eliminated (with Romanian help) Soviet resistance at Sevastopol – the Crimea’s biggest city. Hitler was increasingly impatient for Sevastopol to be taken, and he had said as early as 21 August 1941 that, “the Crimean peninsula has colossal importance for protection of oil supplies from Romania” (8). Soviet bloodletting was again terrible. Since late October 1941 they had suffered over 300,000 casualties during the Battle of Sevastopol. Also on 4 July 1942, Soviet forces retreated from the cities of Kursk and Belgorod further north.

Meanwhile, the fine weather seemed as if it would last forever. On 5 July 1942, German soldiers from the 4th Panzer Army marching under a blazing sun saw water shimmering on the horizon. It was what they hoped to see. They had reached the Don River, just 200 miles west of Stalingrad (9). Ten days after, on 15 July, Soviet forces fled the towns of Boguchar and Millerovo, less than 200 miles from Stalingrad. The way appeared open to advance upon the city.

The following day, 16 July 1942, Hitler relocated hundreds of miles eastwards, settling into new surroundings near the town of Vinnitsa, in central Ukraine. His complex at Rastenburg, East Prussia, was positioned too westward and no longer deemed suitable. Hitler’s headquarters beside Vinnitsa again had the word “wolf” inserted into it, and was called Führerhauptquartier (FHQ) Werwolf. The title was apt here.

Hitler’s chief pilot, Baur, remembered how,

"It sticks in my mind in particular as the place where I first saw wolves outside a zoo. We were taxiing towards the start with Hitler on board, when I spotted a couple of wolves at the edge of the airfield. They didn't seem much disturbed at our approach, and we got quite close to them before they finally looked at us, and then loped off into the forest. My mechanic had drawn Hitler's attention to them, and we all saw them very clearly". (10)

As July 1942 moved on the successes continued, one after another. The German 1st Panzer Army took the city of Voroshilovgrad, in far eastern Ukraine, on 18 July 1942 – followed by the capture of Krasnodon, two days later, another city in the Ukraine's extreme eastern reaches. Virtually all of the Ukraine was now under Nazi rule.

On July 22nd, the German 6th Army reached the great bend in the Don River, as they approached ever closer to Stalingrad. Rostov-on-Don, a sizable Russian city 250 miles from Stalingrad, fell just hours afterwards to the 1st Panzer Army on July 23rd. The taking of Rostov was a significant victory, as the Wehrmacht was previously driven from this city by the Soviets in early December 1941. Older Rostov inhabitants were familiar with the sight of German troops. Rostov had also fallen to the German Army a quarter of a century before, under the leadership of Erich Ludendorff and Paul von Hindenburg.

Image below: A Soviet KV-1 heavy tank destroyed near Voronezh (1942) (Source: Wikimedia Commons)



The day after Rostov's capitulation, 24 July 1942, another major German success was secured with the conclusion of the Battle of Voronezh, near the Don River. The Soviets lost over 550,000 men during the Battle of Voronezh, while the Wehrmacht and their Hungarian allies had less than 100,000 casualties (11). This battle, lasting for almost four weeks, is little known. Yet Soviet losses during it were comfortably higher than German casualties during all of the fighting at Stalingrad. The Red Army could just about afford to sustain such disasters, while the Germans clearly could not. That same date, July 24th, the city of Novocherkassk was taken by the Wehrmacht in Rostov oblast.

There is little doubt that, overall, German troops were of much superior quality to Red Army soldiers, time and again inflicting a far higher casualty rate on the Soviets. The problem was that, in the end, there were simply not enough German soldiers in existence while, as mentioned, the Soviets could call on a vast reserve of fresh troops to fill in their horrendous casualty list.

Yet the German advance continued relentlessly. German Army Group A marched towards the Caucasus on 25 July 1942, and further victories were clocked up. On July 27th, Bataysk, a city in Rostov oblast was taken. The following day Stalin issued Order No. 227 demanding of his soldiers "Not a step back!" Unfortunately for Stalin, this unrealistic order would be

disregarded and had a largely detrimental effect upon morale. There were to be lots of steps back in the days ahead.

From July 30th, the Battle of Rzhev was beginning around 150 miles west of Moscow. Over coming weeks the Soviets would suffer in excess of 300,000 casualties there, about five times as much as the Germans.

On 2 August 1942, a long column of German motorised infantry from the 4th Panzer Army stormed the town of Kotelnikovo, 110 miles south-west of Stalingrad (12). Two days later, the 4th Panzer Army crossed the Askaniya River in its drive on Stalingrad. A few hours after, the city of Voroshilovsk fell on August 5th. Its airport would be used by the Luftwaffe to execute bombing raids on Soviet oil routes. On August 6th, the southern Russian towns of Tikhoretsk and Armavir, 80 miles apart, were taken within hours of each other in the separate advance towards the Caucasus.

On 9 August 1942, special forces led by Waffen-SS officer Adrian von Fölkersam captured the city of Maikop without a fight, at the base of the Caucasus Mountains. In fear of a major German assault, Soviet forces were fleeing in disarray from Maikop, ignoring Stalin's order. Quickly following von Fölkersam's units in the rear, the 1st Panzer Army then occupied Maikop, but found the surrounding area had endured scorched earth tactics. It would prove difficult to exploit Maikop's famous oil reserves. On reaching Maikop the 1st Panzer Army, commanded by Field Marshal Ewald von Kleist, had advanced more than 300 miles in less than two weeks.

On 10 August 1942, the German 6th Army crossed the lower Don River. German officers, pausing for breath under the sun and looking into their binoculars, could clearly see the outer suburbs of Stalingrad before them. Having been shorn of much of their armour the month before, Hitler now expected the 6th Army to take the whole of Stalingrad by October 1942. This industrial city stretched for 25 miles along the western bank of the Volga River. (13)

Southwards, the march to the Caucasus was indeed advancing as planned. On August 15th, the German 23rd Panzer Division captured the town of Georgiyevsk, deep into south-western Russia (14). They were positioned 1,500 miles from Berlin, and within striking range of the frontiers of Georgia.

At this time, in the middle of August 1942, Speer travelled to see an elated Hitler at the FHQ Vinnitsa Werwolf, and he noticed that "The entire headquarters was in splendid humour". Speer joined the dictator outside the latter's modest bungalow, and they sat down on a bench under trees to discuss the next steps.

Hitler explained how they would now "advance south of the Caucasus and then help the rebels in Iran and Iraq against the English. Another thrust will be directed along the Caspian Sea towards Afghanistan and India". Addressing Speer and several industrialists the next day, Hitler expected that "by the end of 1943 we will pitch our tents in Tehran, in Baghdad, and on the Persian Gulf. Then the oil wells will at last be dry as far as the English are concerned". (15)

Within a few months, these dreams of conquest would be shattered. Spread out across endless expanses of the western and south-western Soviet Union by the autumn of 1942, the Germans and their Axis allies were under growing strain.

Pauwels, the experienced world war historian, wrote of the Germans that “when their offensive inevitably petered out, in September of that year [1942], their weakly held lines were stretched along many hundreds of kilometres, presenting a perfect target for a Soviet counterattack. This is the context in which an entire German army was bottled up, and ultimately destroyed, in Stalingrad”. (16)

As further noted by Pauwels, the real turning point of the war in Europe did not occur at Stalingrad, but in fact took place a year before in late 1941, when the Germans failed to capture Moscow. By 1942, the Wehrmacht was irreversibly weakened, their aura of invincibility gone, in spite of all of the above victories.

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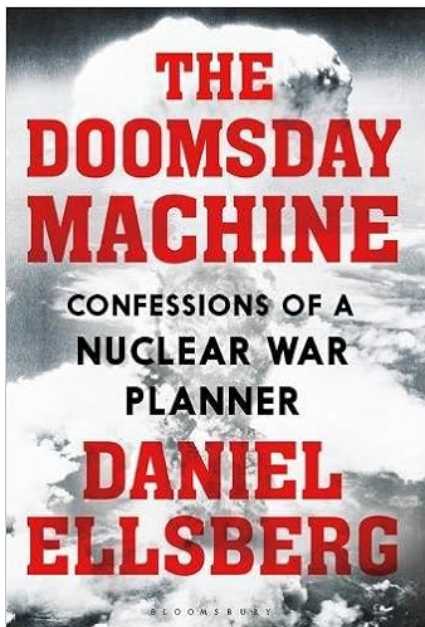
Chapter XV

The Allied Firebombing of German Cities

Shortly after becoming Britain's prime minister in May 1940, Winston Churchill said the war will be directed "against the strength of the German people, which is to be smashed once and for all, regardless of whether it's in the hands of Hitler or a Jesuit priest". Such statements were a warning of what was to come. With the Nazis then rampaging across Europe, it would take time before Britain's firestorms could be unleashed on the German people.

On 30 June 1940, Hitler's Luftwaffe chief Hermann Goering, then at the height of his popularity, declared just days after the fall of France,

"The war against England is to be restricted to destructive attacks against industry and air force targets... It is also stressed that every effort should be made to avoid unnecessary loss of life amongst the civilian population".



By contrast, on 14 February 1942, a British Air Staff directive outlined their bombing campaigns should "be focused on the morale of the enemy's civilian population". As Daniel Ellsberg, the veteran former US military analyst, [confirms](#) in his recent book *The Doomsday Machine*, Britain was the first to begin "deliberate bombing of urban populations as the principal way of fighting a war", starting in early 1942.

The murderous assaults on German civilians, often with incendiary bombs, were specifically to the liking of not just Churchill. Also a vociferous supporter of these methods was

England's Air Marshal, Arthur "Bomber" Harris- or "Butcher" Harris as he was known in the Royal Air Force. Among his first public broadcasts in the beginning of 1942, Harris said the Nazis had "sowed the wind, and now they are going to reap the whirlwind".

Britain's unscrupulous intentions were being signaled in even earlier military pronouncements. On 23 September 1941, a British Air Staff paper [outlined that](#):

"The ultimate aim of an attack on a [German] town area is to break the morale of the population which occupies it... first, we must make the town physically uninhabitable and, secondly, we must make the people conscious of constant personal danger. The immediate aim is therefore twofold, namely, to produce (i) destruction and (ii) fear of death".

It was only after Britain began their mass targeting of residential areas that the Nazis responded in kind. On 28 March 1942, the RAF firestormed the medieval city of Lubeck, northern Germany, which persuaded Hitler to alter his tactics. During the British night raid on Lubeck, over 60% of all buildings there suffered damage, severe or light. The attacks lasted less than four hours, in which hundreds of Lubeck's civilians were killed in the lightly-defended city.

"Bomber" Harris was satisfied with the destruction, saying Lubeck "was built more like a fire-lighter than a human habitation... it seemed to me better to destroy an industrial town of moderate importance [Lubeck] than to fail to destroy a large industrial city".



Lübeck Cathedral burning following the raids (Licensed under CC-BY-SA 3.0)

Britain's outright targeting of German cities enraged Hitler. Just over two weeks after the Lubeck bombing, on 14 April 1942, a command was forwarded at his behest:

"The Fuhrer has ordered that the air war against England be given a more aggressive stamp... preference is to be given to those where attacks are likely to have the greatest possible effect on civilian life".

It would be unwise to suggest, however, that until April 1942 Hitler was a soft touch in

relation to bombardment. For example, in September 1941, as his forces surrounded the Russian city of Leningrad (Petersburg), Hitler relayed the following order:

“The Fuhrer has decided to raze the city of Petersburg from the face of the earth. There is no reason for the future existence of this large city”.

Along with the people in it.

Soon, America willingly joined their British ally in the annihilation of German cities. In July 1943, US and British bombers killed over 40,000 civilians in Hamburg in a 10 day campaign – even more than was killed during the Luftwaffe’s eight month blitz of Britain. An eyewitness account of the Hamburg firestorms noted that

“Some people who tried to walk along, they were pulled in by the fire, they all of a sudden disappeared right in front of you”, while afterwards “Rats and flies ruled the city”.



Royal Air Force Bomber Command, 1942-1945. Oblique aerial view of ruined residential and commercial buildings south of the Eilbek Park (seen at upper right) in the Eilbek district of Hamburg, Germany. These were among the 16,000 multi-storeyed apartment buildings destroyed by the firestorm which developed during the raid by Bomber Command on the night of 27/28 July 1943 (Operation GOMORRAH). The road running diagonally from upper left to lower right is Eilbeker Weg, crossed by Rückertstraße.

The German historian and author, Jorg Friedrich, outlines that in total About 600,000 German civilians were killed, including 76,000 children. It led Friedrich to describe Churchill as “the greatest child-slaughterer of all time”, with ample assistance provided by “Butcher” Harris, living up to his other nickname.

Little of these unwanted realities are outlined in Western mainstream records, historical accounts or school books. It seems not to fit with Western leaders' saintly notion of the war being fought between "good" and "evil". While Hitler's Reich was one of the most murderous regimes in world history, Britain and America had hardly been angels of virtue until that point.

During Britain's long subjugation and plundering of India, beginning in the mid-18th century – the imperial power's policies were responsible for killing tens of millions of Indian people, mainly due to starvation caused from unnecessary droughts. In the year 1700, India had been one of the world's richest countries, boasting 27% of global gross domestic product. By the time India finally gained independence from Britain in 1947, it was one of the earth's poorest nations, while further plagued by widespread illiteracy and disease.

The United States' foundation was built on settler-colonialism. Its basis was laid after Christopher Columbus, a mass murderer himself, "discovered" the continent in the late 15th century – often overlooked is that the indigenous population of 80 million or more had already long resided there. What followed was the Native Americans being "exterminated" in the words of America's founding fathers, as the "superior" Anglo-Saxon race moved in and took their lands.

Meanwhile, as the Second World War advanced, one German city after another was incinerated by firestorms. Even small towns like Pforzheim, in southwest Germany, were obliterated by the RAF, killing a third of its 63,000 inhabitants in February 1945. Such atrocities came long after victory in the war was assured, mainly due to the Red Army's exploits in the east.

It was previously hoped the Allies' policies would turn Germany's population against Hitler. It never happened. Not envisaged was that, from the mid-1930s until war's end, millions of Germans were exposed to Joseph Goebbels' daily propaganda methods. Goebbels had, through devious marketing campaigns, ensured increasing numbers had access to radio sets. Through this medium, the virulently anti-Semitic propaganda minister had monopoly over the German mind. Come 1942 sixteen million households, about 70% of the German population, had confirmed radio reception. It should also be noted the dangers in rebelling against a dictatorship protected by Hitler's personal bodyguard, the genocidal SS.

As the destruction mounted, by 20 April 1944 – Hitler's 55th birthday – adorning Berlin's wrecked buildings were hundreds of miniature swastikas and banners, addressed personally to Hitler. Some messages read, "Our walls have broken, but not our hearts". To avoid seeing the ruins, Hitler's rare visits to Berlin were made by night. And yet, contrary to popular perception, Albert Speer observed that Hitler did not react to news of the Reich's bombardment with apoplectic outbursts – rather, he responded to bombing reports with austere, reserved expressions.

The dictator only betrayed pained feelings when he learnt a particular theater or museum was damaged, such buildings being among his most prized possessions before the war. Residential areas were always of secondary importance. As a result, Hitler was oblivious to much of the German people's suffering.

Indeed, from 23 June 1941, the Nazi leader spent over 800 days at the heavily wooded Wolf's Lair headquarters, in East Prussia – 700 kilometers east of Berlin. The enormous military compound was built specifically for Hitler's overseeing of Operation Barbarossa, on

the Eastern Front. Remarkably, the heavily guarded headquarters escaped the attention of both Allied and Soviet intelligence. Hitler's private secretary Traudl Junge said "there was never more than a single aircraft circling over the forest, and no bombs were dropped".

At the Wolf's Lair, secured from the realities of war, and surrounded by obsequious followers, Hitler eventually entered into a type of fantasy realm, as – despite a string of initial successes – the war slowly closed in around him. On 20 November 1944, Hitler departed the Wolf's Lair for the final time, with the Soviet Army just 15 kilometers away having reached the small town of Angerburg.

Chapter XVI

Western Allies Terror-bombed 70 German Cities

During late November 1944, the German armaments minister Albert Speer met with his leader, Adolf Hitler, at the Reich Chancellery in Berlin so as to debate the ongoing war effort. Much to Hitler's incredulity, Speer had been overseeing what seemed like miracles for months on end.

In late 1944 German production of panzers, aircraft and munitions reached an all-time high, in spite of the now almost unchallenged Allied aerial attacks.

While Speer and Hitler convened for discussions, the Nazi leader gestured outside towards the ruins of Berlin. Hitler turned and said jokingly,

"What does all that signify, Speer? In Berlin alone you would have to tear down 80,000 buildings to complete our new building plan. Unfortunately, the English haven't carried out this work exactly in accordance with your plans, but at least they have launched the project".

Hitler was in fact shaken by the devastation meted out upon the Reich by British and American aircraft – but what maintained his spirits during the war's late stages was the great assault he was preparing to unleash mostly through Belgium: The Ardennes Offensive, which would send Allied armies careering back into the English Channel.

The Ardennes itself – with its vast woodlands, rolling valleys and winding rivers – was a magical, mystical place for Hitler, and one he long associated with his crushing victory over France more than four years before; as the panzers and armoured vehicles somehow carved a path through the Ardennes' "impenetrable" forests. It was no coincidence that in this dense, misty terrain, the dictator would launch a second major land incursion.

The Ardennes Offensive, beginning in December 1944, would not have been possible had Allied leaders directed their pilots more regularly towards bombardment of German industrial plants, communication signals and transportation lines.

Instead, from 1940 British and later American airmen were ordered to implement "area bombing"; in plain English, the destruction of cities and residential areas which entailed, as was known, the deaths of noncombatants like women, children, along with the elderly. This

was a particular brand of Anglo-Saxon warfare, which had prior agreement in the highest levels of Allied government circles.

Shortly after becoming Britain's prime minister in May 1940, Winston Churchill [had said](#),

“this war is not against Hitler or National Socialism, but against the strength of the German people, which is to be smashed once and for all, regardless of whether it is in the hands of Hitler or a Jesuit priest”.

By the spring of 1945, Allied aircraft had terror-bombed a remarkable 70 cities [across Germany](#) – killing around 600,000 of the Reich's civilians, the majority of whom were mothers and children, coupled with those too old to fight – along with destroying countless hospitals, schools and historical buildings. In contrast, the Luftwaffe's Blitz of Britain killed less than 10% of the above total, about 40,000 people.

Of the 70 German cities firebombed, 69 of them endured the obliteration of 50% or more of their urban areas.

Civilians were indeed largely targeted. Over the war's duration, more than 2.6 million tons of bombs were dropped on Germany or Reich-occupied territory; of this, less than 2% of the total bomb outlay fell upon the Nazis' war-making factories. The vast majority of the rest were dumped over densely populated quarters and workers' homes, separately killing large numbers of downtrodden POWs.

The Western media strongly backed the firestorming of German and Japanese cities, even demanding “more bombing of civilian targets”, whilst criticizing the few attacks restricted to military and industrial zones.

In Europe these actions were sometimes justified by claiming that every German was a supporter of Hitler, and therefore deserved their fate. Conveniently forgotten was that Hitler received little more than a third (36.8%) of the popular vote in the spring 1932 presidential elections; while Paul von Hindenburg took home more than half (53%) of all votes. In the July 1932 federal elections the Nazi Party, though now the largest in Germany, still fell far short of a majority, as they claimed just over a third (37%) of the entire vote – and Hitler's support actually declined slightly to 33% in the November 1932 federal elections.

Later, the desire to smash “the strength of the German people” mostly spared the Nazis' crucial weapons factories, rail networks and other resource lines. It was a great delusion on the part of Western political and military figureheads, to believe that hitting general populations would bring the enemy to their knees.

As Hermann Goering's 1940-41 Blitz bore proof of, unloading bombs over heavily populated regions did nothing to break a people's morale, but in fact bolstered a nation's resolve. When relatives or friends are killed by enemy shells, the natural human reaction is to seek revenge, while the hardship brings people together.

Unlike British and American statesmen, Hitler recognized not long after the Blitz that aerial demolition of cities would not wreck the endurance of foreign populaces. During November 1944 Hitler was again [telling Speer](#) that,

“These air raids don't both me. I only laugh at them. The less the population has to lose, the more fanatically it will fight. We've seen that with the English you know, and even

with the Russians. One who has lost everything has to win everything... People fight fanatically only when they have the war at their own front doors. That's how people are".

Three months later, at the February 1945 Yalta Conference in the Crimea, Churchill was formulating the massive attack on Dresden with his advisers. President Franklin D. Roosevelt was terribly ill at this stage but he agreed at Yalta to pinpointing Dresden, in which over 500 American heavy bombers would partake, supported by smaller aircraft.



Dresden after the bombing raid (Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 de)

As proceedings at Yalta concluded on 11 February 1945, the firestorming of Dresden began two days later against a city whose population had swollen to over one million people, including 400,000 refugees.

Today, it is still unknown how many innocents were killed, with numbers ranging from 100,000 dead up to an extravagant half a million. Hundreds of evacuee children lost their lives, while scores of American Mustang fighter-bombers returned to mow down beleaguered survivors crowding alongside river banks and in gardens. Compounding these war crimes, Dresden contained no significant armament facilities and was an undefended university town.

While Hitler was particularly brutal in the genocide he pursued primarily against Jewish populations, he was not a proponent of systematic annihilation of urbanized places – euphemistically titled “strategic bombing”. He had not prepared for it. Throughout the war, the Germans had no possession at all of four-engine heavy bomber aircraft.

Little known, and of some importance, is that the Luftwaffe’s Blitz of Britain came as a [direct response](#) to British aerial attacks over German cities. Initially, Hitler had issued strict orders that no bombs be released on London.



Liverpool city centre after heavy bombing (Licensed under Public Domain)

RAF planes pounded Berlin almost every night from 25 August 1940 until 7 September 1940, the latter date heralding the Blitz's commencement in riposte to British targeting of German populated regions. There can be little doubt that Britain started the air war against populated centres, and in fact London's bombers had first attacked Berlin on 15 May 1940, during the Battle of France.



People in London look at a map illustrating how the RAF is striking back at Germany during 1940 (Licensed under Public Domain)

For years before Hitler had come to power, influential Britons were espousing the dropping of bombs over civilian targets – dating to such men as Lord Hugh Trenchard, England's esteemed First World War air commander and military strategist.

As far back as 1916, Lord Trenchard was expounding that, "The moral effect produced by a hostile aeroplane... is out of proportion to the damage it can inflict". The following year,

1917, he pleaded with Britain's War Cabinet in allowing him to "attack the industrial centres of Germany"; and in 1918 dozens of tons of British bombs were raining down from the skies over German cities, from Cologne to Stuttgart.

In May 1941, Lord Trenchard outlined to Churchill that the German [achilles heel](#) "is the morale of her civilian population under air attacks" and "it is at this weak point that we should strike again and again".

Two months later, July 1941, Churchill told Roosevelt that "we must subject Germany and Italy to a ceaseless and ever-growing bombardment". Roosevelt presumably agreed with this assertion, as the US president had reacted positively when hearing plans in November 1940 regarding proposed American firebombing attacks on Japan.

By the early 1940s, fascist Italy fell out of favour in Washington and London. Yet during the 1930s Roosevelt had been quite supportive of Benito Mussolini's regime, with the new US leader writing in June 1933 that he was "deeply impressed by what he [Mussolini] has accomplished", [describing him](#) as "that admirable Italian gentleman".

The British and American capitalist business communities were generally benevolent to both Mussolini and Hitler, investing significant sums in the dictatorial states, and viewing them as bulwarks against Bolshevism.

US General Billy Mitchell, an instrumental figure often dubbed "the father of the American air force", was an ingrained exponent of mass raids over city environments. In 1932, Mitchell wrote in an article relating to Japan that,

"These towns, built largely of wood and paper, form the greatest aerial targets the world has ever seen".

Also keen supporters of attacking built-up centres were Cordell Hull, Roosevelt's Secretary of State, and General George Marshall, the US Army Chief of Staff.

One need but glance at the array of four-engine heavy bombers dominating the British and American fleets: Such as London's Short Stirling (introduced August 1940), the Handley Page Halifax (introduced November 1940) and Avro Lancaster (introduced February 1942); along with Washington's Boeing B-17 (introduced April 1938) and the B-24 Liberator (introduced March 1941). These airplanes were undergoing design long before Germany's invasion of Poland in September 1939, or indeed Japan's December 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor.

The above aircraft boasted flying ranges of over a thousand miles upwards past two thousand miles; while the Luftwaffe's most widely known airplane, the one-engine Stuka divebomber, held a roaming distance of just 200 miles. Allied aircraft could fly far and wide so as to inflict widespread damage over concrete landscapes; while they were not created as such to aim at specific military installations or war-making facilities.

Britain's Stirling and Lancaster bombers were designed to carry over 6,000 kilograms (14,000 pounds) of explosives, compared to the Stuka's 700 kilograms (1,500 pounds). The Stuka's most infamous feature was its howling, melancholic siren, which was personally devised by Hitler in order to induce maximum psychological damage on civilians, but not so much physical harm.

The aerial bombardment of German, and Japanese cities, had served to lengthen World War II by many, many months – as the raids often spared not merely industrial hotspots, but also enemy soldiers. The running joke was that the safest place to be is at the front.

Speer outlined, “The war would largely have been decided in 1943” if enemy aircraft “had concentrated on the centres of armaments production”. Yet in their bloodlust, the Allied commanders did not relent in their desire to decimate civilian areas.

Nazi Germany’s ball bearing and fuel depots, pivotal to various armaments in her war machine, were bombed sporadically at times and not at all mostly. From spring 1944, intermittent Allied air raids upon the ball bearing industry abruptly stopped.

Speer [remarked that](#), “the Allies threw away success when it was already in their hands” while “Hitler’s credo that the impossible could be made possible” looked to be running true to form. “You’ll straighten all that out again” the Nazi leader assured Speer when war production was briefly reduced, and as the latter noted, “In fact Hitler was right – we straightened it out again”. Armaments manufacturing remained strong, giving Hitler hope that the German ability to recover from seemingly desperate predicaments could yet turn the war around.

As a consequence of the Allied fixation on turning populated centres into rubble, almost to the end of the war German construction of heavy armour and ammunition rose. Speer revealed “our astonishment” as the enemy “once again ceased his attacks on the ball bearing industry”.

Perhaps it was not as astonishing as it appeared. On 28 July 1942 Arthur “Bomber” Harris, leader of RAF Bomber Command, said that his pilots were bombing one German city after another “in order to make it impossible for her to go on with the war. That is our object; we shall pursue it relentlessly”.

Such was Harris’ desire to wreak vengeance on civilians that he opposed the introduction of other aircraft – like the RAF’s Pathfinder – that could have significantly improved precision of aerial assaults, potentially shifting Bomber Command’s focus towards military-related targets. Harris feared that the Pathfinder, introduced in the autumn of 1942, would lead to calls [for an end](#) to terror-bombing of cities, his specialty.

Harris portrayed the firestorming of Hamburg in July 1943 as “a relatively humane method”; raids which killed tens of thousands of people, mostly civilians.

The Western democracies and “defenders of civilization” – in opposition to fascist tyranny – pursued the most destructive and crude of methods in a supposed bid to quickly win the war.

Chapter XVII

Fallacy of Terror-bombing Urban Areas

Though remaining unmentioned in official texts, the origins of the dubiously titled Cold War can be traced to policies pursued by American leaders during World War II itself. Following Nazi Germany's calamitous defeat at Stalingrad in early 1943, Washington's ongoing construction of the atomic bomb was implemented with the Soviets in mind.

Three months before even the D-Day landings US General Leslie Groves, a virulent anti-communist, confirmed in March 1944 that the atomic bomb was being produced in order to "subdue the Soviets", then an irreplaceable ally of the West.

Aged 46, Groves assumed charge of the US nuclear program in September 1942, and he proved a ruthless, crafty figure who possessed huge power in his new position. Groves in fact held control over every facet of America's nuclear project, from the technical and scientific aspects, to areas of production and security, along with implementing plans as to where the bombs would be deployed.

Less than six weeks after the atomic attacks over Japan, on 15 September 1945 the Pentagon finalized a list: Through which it expounded strategies [to annihilate](#) 66 Soviet cities with 204 atomic bombs, to be executed through synchronized aerial assaults. This ratio averages at slightly more than three bombs discharged upon each city.

However, six atomic weapons apiece were categorized to obliterate 10 of the Soviets' biggest urban centres, that is 60 bombs combined would be dropped over the following: Moscow (Russian capital), Leningrad, Novosibirsk, Kiev (Ukrainian capital), Kharkov, Koenigsberg, Riga (Latvian capital), Odessa, Ulan-Ude and Tashkent (Uzbekistan capital). This alone would have gone a long way towards destroying the Soviet Union.

Yet it was the mere beginning. Five atomic weapons each (35 altogether) were identified to liquidate another seven large cities in the USSR: Stalingrad, Sverdlovsk, Vilnius (Lithuanian capital), Lvov, Kazan, Voronezh and Nizhni Tagil.

Continuing, four bombs apiece (28 in total) were earmarked to desolate seven more significant urban areas: Gorki, Alma Ata, Tallinn (Estonian capital), Rostov-on-Don, Yaroslavl, Ivanovo, and Chimkent.

In addition, three atomic bombs each (36 combined) were marked down to eliminate 12 other notable cities, ranging from Tbilisi (Georgian capital) and Stalinsk to Vladivostok, Archangel and Dnepropetrovsk.

Of these 36 Soviet cities outlined to be blown up – requiring between three to six atomic bombs per city – 25 of them belong to Russia, while the remaining 11 cities stretch across the Ukraine, Georgia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. The process of annihilation was to be directed not simply against eastern Europe and Russia, but extending to Central Asia too.

All of the USSR's remaining 30 cities were highlighted as needing either one or two atomic weapons each, split down the middle: 15 cities necessitating two bombs apiece and the other 15 designated for one bomb each. Among these are yet more countries and well known places such as Minsk (Belarusian capital), Brest Litovsk, Baku (Azerbaijan capital) and Murmansk. The devastation was once more to spread past eastern Europe, and beyond Russia itself as far as Turkmenistan, where oil and gas rich Neftedag was to be hit with one atomic weapon.

A few of the above cities that the Pentagon was aiming to destroy are located in nations that have since joined NATO, a US-led military organization – like those in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, whose capital cities were listed as requiring 15 atomic bombs combined. The city of Belostok, in now NATO state Poland, was to be struck with two atomic weapons. These programs, if followed through, would have resulted in many tens of millions of deaths, far exceeding the loss of life during the Second World War.

Moreover, in 1945 some of the aforementioned Soviet urban regions were already lying in ruins following years of Nazi occupation, such as Kharkov, Vilnius, Tallinn and Rostov-on-Don. US atomic attacks over these places would largely have been hitting wrecked buildings. The Soviet Union lost more than 25 million people to Hitler’s armies, and was still reeling internally at war’s end.

Three weeks before Groves was completing his atomic plans, a late August 1945 Gallup poll found that nearly 70% of Americans [believed the](#) atomic bomb’s creation was “a good thing”, with just 17% feeling it to be “a bad thing”. It can be surmised these opinions would have altered somewhat, had the public been aware of what was occurring in the corridors of power.

Do you think it was a good thing or a bad thing that the atomic bomb was developed?		
	Aug 24-29, 1945	Jun 5-7, 1998
	%	%
Good thing	69	36
Bad thing	17	61
No opinion	14	3
Based on U.S. adults		
GALLUP		

One can but look on aghast at the sheer devious and audacious nature pertaining to the proposed demolition of 66 cities, across land areas spanning thousands of miles. In an age before the Internet and convenient handheld technology, these in depth stratagems would have required months of toil. The schemes may well have begun formulation around the time of Groves’ March 1944 confession to nuclear physicist Joseph Rotblat.

Groves was a driving force behind the plan to eviscerate all Soviet industrial and military capacity, with key assistance coming from Major General Lauris Norstad. Yet high ranking soldiers cannot undertake operations at this level without approval emanating from elite political circles.

As a consequence of America’s nuclear programs dating to World War II, it is grossly and historically inaccurate to suggest that the self-styled Cold War began in 1947 – as likewise are the claims that the Russians were to blame for resumption of hostile attitudes and policies. The masses have been sorely misled on these issues for more than seven decades.

Despite its importance, virtually the entire Western mainstream press (and most alternative media) have continued ignoring the Pentagon’s 1945 plan to incinerate dozens of Soviet cities. In isolation amid commercial media the British Daily Star newspaper, on 8 January 2018, [issued a report](#) regarding US proposals “to completely wipe Russia off the map” with

“a stockpile of 466 bombs”.

Nonetheless the 466 total was then not a realistic one, and such high bomb estimates were dismissed by Groves himself as “excessive”, in his top secret memorandum to Norstad on 26 September 1945. Groves [also outlined](#) in the same letter that, “It is not essential to get total destruction of a city in order to destroy its effectiveness. Hiroshima no longer exists as a city, even though the area of total destruction is considerably less than total”.

Relating to their nuclear designs, Groves and Norstad had a most serious problem before their eyes, and one that would infuriate them both; along with, as we shall see, president Harry Truman. In late 1945, the US military held just two atomic bombs, and thoughts of decimating the USSR at this point were that of a pipe dream.

Accumulation of the necessary weapons was painstakingly slow, even for the world’s wealthiest nation. By 30 June 1946, the stockpile of US atomic bombs had increased to nine. Come November 1947 the arsenal had risen to 13 bombs, still remarkably small.

Seven months previously on 3 April 1947, president Truman, who was privy to proposals in wiping out the USSR, was [himself informed](#) of just how diminutive the US nuclear stash was. Truman “was shocked” to learn they had just a dozen atomic weapons, as he presumed the Pentagon had amassed a far greater number. Such was the secrecy of America’s nuclear program, few enjoyed intimate knowledge of the facts.

That same year, 1947, Winston Churchill implored Styles Bridges, a Republican senator visiting London, that an atomic bomb be dropped on the Kremlin “wiping it out”, thereby rendering Russia “without direction” and “a very easy problem to handle”. Churchill was hoping that Bridges [would persuade](#) Truman to effectuate this action. During the recent past, Churchill had received a royal welcome at the Kremlin and enjoyed a feast with Stalin there in August 1942, before he returned to Moscow for further meetings in late 1944. Three years later Churchill wished for the Kremlin to be turned into dust.

Meanwhile by 30 June 1948, the US nuclear cache climbed to 50 atomic bombs, and from therein the figures rocketed – come summer 1949, the US military finally held ownership of over 200 atomic bombs, heralding the era of “nuclear plenty”. Groves was since removed from his post, and even more dangerous individuals like General Curtis LeMay became prominent in American nuclear war planning.

In October 1949, LeMay expanded the plans so as to include 104 Soviet urban zones to be destroyed with 220 bombs “in a single massive attack”, and another 72 held back for “a re-attack reserve”. The 292 bombs allocated were available by June 1950.

However, the preceding year in August 1949, the global balance had irrevocably shifted, as Soviet Russia successfully detonated an atomic weapon over a testing ground in north-eastern Kazakhstan. Soviet acquisition of the bomb before 1950 came as a nasty shock to Washington. It would prove a vital deterrent to American nuclear designs, with the Russians having little choice but to follow suit and earmark urban areas in the West, relating to their own nuclear war schemes.

America’s invention of the hydrogen bomb in late 1952, quickly followed by the Soviets, dramatically altered the scope and killing estimates of nuclear war. The humble atomic bomb it seems was no longer of sufficient yield, and underwent an “upgrading” as humanity

took a leap towards self-destruction.

The new hydrogen weapon, or H-bomb, was hundreds of times more powerful than its atomic cousin, and by the late 1950s H-bombs were being produced en masse by the Pentagon. Come December 1960 – with the American arsenal now at a staggering 18,000 nuclear weapons – it was calculated that practically every citizen in the Soviet Union would be killed, either from the hydrogen bombs' blast radius or through resulting fallout. As was known, much of the radioactive poisoning would likely be blown on the wind across Europe, further affecting Warsaw Pact states and NATO allies.

Since 1950, the People's Republic of China was added to the US nuclear hit list, a country which then consisted of over half a billion people; more than twice that of the USSR's populace; while the Chinese themselves did not obtain nuclear weapons until the mid-1960s. Communist China and her cities were categorized to be levelled in tandem with Soviet metropolises, bringing an overall predicted death toll to hundreds of millions.

Due to a combination of deterrence, mutually assured destruction (MAD), and hefty portions of luck, no such terrible programs were executed, during what has been described for over 70 years as the "Cold War". Rather than a cold conflict, the post-1945 years were organized for humanity to witness the hottest war in human history.

Because of Soviet intelligence reports, Stalin knew as early as four years prior to Hiroshima that America was developing "a uranium bomb". By confirming to the Russians they held a new weapon of unparalleled destructive might Washington would furthermore, as envisaged, hold greater influence in boardroom negotiations with the Soviets.

Chapter XVIII

Red Army Winter Counteroffensive

Beginning eight decades ago on 5 December 1941, the Soviet Army's counterattack against the Wehrmacht, principally along the outskirts of Moscow, was a major event in the Second World War and a significant occurrence in modern history. The Red Army counteroffensive officially lasted from early December 1941 until 7 May 1942.

The counterattack was titled by the Russians as the Winter Campaign of 1941-1942, and it provided evidence, both to themselves and the watching world, that the Wehrmacht was not invincible. The failure of Operation Barbarossa further placed a serious question mark over whether the Germans could win the war at all.

Very thankfully indeed, Moscow, the Soviet Union's largest and most important city, was saved from Nazi occupation. The commencement of the counterattack brought relief and hope to many people across Europe and beyond, who had despaired at the thought of a Nazi-dominated world.



Yet while the Soviet Army managed to drive the Wehrmacht back from the gates of Moscow, they were unable to turn the counteroffensive into a rout; which, in that event, would most probably have led to the German Army's disintegration in the winter of 1941-42; and therefore the premature conclusion of the war, in Europe at least. French military leader Napoleon's armed forces, after all, had crumbled within 6 months of their June 1812 invasion of Russia.

It was for reasons like these that the Russian Marshal Georgy Zhukov, the most celebrated commander of World War II, bluntly termed the Soviet counteroffensive to be a "failure". Zhukov wrote in his memoirs, "The History of the Great Fatherland War still comes to a generally positive conclusion about the winter offensive of our forces, despite the lack of success. I do not agree with this evaluation. The embellishment of history, one could say, is a sad attempt to paint over failure. If you consider our losses and what results were achieved, it will be clear that it was a Pyrrhic victory". (1)

Zhukov was not exaggerating; he was a frontline general who could see what was going on before his eyes, and he had the resolve to voice his thoughts. As Zhukov noted, Red Army personnel losses during the counteroffensive were heavy, much higher than German casualties in what is often considered a landmark Soviet triumph. Altogether, during the three months of January, February and March 1942, the Soviet Army lost 620,000 men (2). By comparison, in the same period the Germans lost 136,000 men, well under a quarter of Russian casualties. (3)

The experienced British historian Evan Mawdsley, who focuses for the large part on Russian history, has presented the above casualty figures in his study of the Nazi-Soviet War. Mawdsley also stated, "German losses on the Eastern front, in the three and a quarter months through to the end of September 1941, numbered 185,000" and that "All told, the Red Army lost 177 divisions in 1941, most of them in the June-September period. Soviet military losses, up to the end of September 1941, have been given as at least 2,050,000". (4)

Joseph Stalin had said shortly after the Wehrmacht's defeat of France in June 1940, "we would be able to confront the Germans on an equal basis only by 1943" (5). This prediction was a far-sighted and accurate one. The Red Army "would only show great progress with Operation Bagration in Belorussia in June 1944", Mawdsley highlighted. (6)

Stalin is not recorded as mentioning why the Red Army was trailing the Wehrmacht by such a distance in the early 1940s; and considering that he was in charge of the USSR, for appreciably longer than Adolf Hitler was in power in Germany.

The Soviet military's shortcomings were at least in part because, as Marshal Zhukov said after the war, of "the enormous damage Stalin had inflicted on the country by his massacre of the top echelons of the army command" (7).

Zhukov's opinion is backed by others like Leopold Trepper, a leading Soviet intelligence operative and anti-Nazi Resistance fighter, who wrote that with the purges, "The Red Army, bled white, was hardly an army at all now, and it would not be again for years". (8)

Meanwhile, as the Soviet counteroffensive began the Red Army, between December 1941 and March 1942, would receive 117 new divisions to bolster its ranks. The main opposing force, German Army Group Centre, was supplemented with a meagre 9 divisions during that time. (9)

By 26 November 1941 the Germans had suffered 743,112 casualties, not including the sick or frostbitten – and at the end of February 1942, total German losses on the Eastern front amounted to 1,005,636 men; this equates to about 31% of the original German invasion force, according to military scholar Donald J. Goodspeed, who has provided these various statistics (10). In comparison, the Soviet Army had suffered around 5.5 million casualties come the early spring of 1942.

Hitler placed immense store in the millions of casualties his divisions had inflicted on the Red Army (11). By late February 1942 he was again confident in ultimate victory. A jovial Hitler declared to his close colleagues at the Wolfsschanze headquarters, "Sunday will be the 1st of March. Boys, you can't imagine what that means to me – how much the last three months have worn out my strength, tested my nervous resistance". (12)

During December 1941 and in the months ahead, many German commanders in varying degrees continued to believe in victory. Goodspeed observed that the Wehrmacht hierarchy "reasoned that they were still better summer soldiers than the Russians, and that they should therefore fight in the summertime" in order to "build up their shattered armies for another great drive in 1942". (13)

Hitler and the generals' confidence would prove misplaced. The Soviets could afford far greater losses in personnel than the Germans, and this should have been no real surprise. The Soviet Union's population in 1941 was about 193 million, that is 80 million or so more than the Third Reich's populace. The Soviet counterattack grand strategy called for an assault along a broad front, 800 miles in width, from Leningrad in the north to the Crimean peninsula in the south (14). Its aim was to deliver a succession of blows that would gravely undermine the Germans and their Axis allies, resulting in the enemy's swift collapse, or so it was envisaged.

This strategy was formulated with decisive input by Stalin, in conjunction with the Supreme

High Command (Stavka). Zhukov was in firm disagreement with the counteroffensive's strategic design. In his memoirs Zhukov wrote that he alone "dared to voice criticism" about the plan to Stalin and Stavka. (15)

For the counterattack, Zhukov favoured amassing their forces and directing them in a smashing thrust through the middle "against the enemy centre of gravity". This strategy may well have inflicted a grievous hit, which the Germans would have struggled to recover from. Instead, with the dispersal of Soviet divisions across an extended front, the strength of the blow was diluted. Zhukov felt that he lacked the forces necessary to reach his goals.

Of the Russian counteroffensive strategy Mawdsley realised, "The Stavka made the same mistake that Hitler and his High Command had made in 1941, assuming the enemy to be exhausted and shattered. It also attempted, as the Germans did in Operation Barbarossa, to attack everywhere. Zhukov's view was that it would have been much wiser to concentrate resources and get to the line Staraia Russa-Velikie Luki-Vitebsk-Smolensk-Briansk". (16)

Zhukov's favoured striking line was 350 miles in breadth, as opposed to the 800 miles which Stalin preferred. Despite Zhukov's misgivings about Soviet strategy, his still significant role in the counterattack got off to an impressive start from 6 December 1941. Zhukov found himself in opposition to one of the Wehrmacht's most prominent generals, Heinz Guderian, commanding the 2nd Panzer Army.

There was severe bloodshed on both sides but Zhukov's divisions prevailed over those of Guderian, by forcing the latter to retreat over more than 50 miles of ground (17). Zhukov's reputation, now already high in the Soviet Union, was deservedly enhanced further.

English historian Chris Bellamy revealed how Zhukov expounded, in a directive of 13 December 1941, that Soviet troops should force the enemy to retreat 130 to 160 kilometres (80 to 100 miles) west of Moscow (18). Once that was accomplished, Zhukov continued that the Red Army should thereafter "spend the rest of the winter driving the Germans back another 150 kilometres (93 miles) or so to the line east of Smolensk [230 miles west of Moscow] from which they had launched Typhoon in early October". (19)

Zhukov's scaled-down ambitions for the counteroffensive were realistic, but even then would fall a good distance short. Zhukov complained bitterly that many Soviet units elsewhere had been poorly led and "were continually trying to attack the Germans frontally, rather than being smart and working their way round the sides". (20)

Mawdsley wrote, "In reality the Red Army was a very weak instrument in the winter of 1941-42, manned by untrained conscripts and poorly equipped. In January 1942, the whole Red Army had only 600 heavy tanks and 800 medium tanks, plus 6,300 light tanks; in contrast, the figure for January 1943 was 2,000 heavies [tanks], no fewer than 7,600 mediums, and 11,000 lights". (21)

Hitler was aware that Napoleon's Grand Armée had dissolved in full retreat 129 years before (22). Undeterred by this, in the face of Soviet counterattacks, some senior German commanders wanted a retirement far west of Moscow, to the Berezina or Niemen rivers (stretching across Belarus and Lithuania).

Such a retreat in mid-December, through knee and waist-deep snow, could have resulted in the destruction of the German Army. At a minimum, vast quantities of artillery and other

equipment would undoubtedly have been lost – and during a season which “turned out to be one of the most severe winters on record”, a research study noted in the Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society. (23)

By 20 February 1942, the Germans had suffered 112,627 frostbite casualties (24). This problem did not afflict the Russians to anything like the same degree; because the latter were warmly clad and had a working railway system right behind them, while they were used to fighting in winter conditions. Stalin said after the Soviets had finally overcome Finland in March 1940, “It is not true that the army’s fighting capacity decreases in wintertime... We are a northern country”. (25)

In the middle of December 1941 Hitler issued his standfast order. He demanded that German officers, from herein, compel the soldiers under them to hold their ground at whatever cost. Hitler went on that German troops in the field should ignore the danger, when enemy forces have “broken through on the flanks or in the rear. This is the only way to gain the time necessary, to bring up the reinforcements from Germany and the West that I have ordered”. (26)

Hitler had previously interfered fatally in German strategic planning, most notably by postponing the advance on Moscow by six weeks in August 1941; but his hold-at-all-cost order was in all likelihood the correct decision, and it may have rescued the Wehrmacht that winter. (27)

The Germans prudently made no attempt to retain a continuous line from Leningrad to the Crimea. Hitler and the German High Command (OHK) agreed on implementing a series of strongpoints, known as “hedgehogs” (28). These fortified positions were often erected beside large German supply depots, located from north to south, in such urban areas under Nazi occupation as Shlisselburg, Novgorod, Rzhev, Vyazma, Bryansk and Kharkov, etc. Subsidiary strongpoints were then constructed beside the principal strongholds.

The reality on the ground was more complicated than this; for the German hedgehogs were sometimes established in response to local Soviet tactical successes, rather than simply through the will of the Germans (29). Breakthroughs by Russian soldiers on the flanks were deemed acceptable by Wehrmacht commanders, since any Soviet division that proceeded too far was in danger of being cut off, and trapped behind German lines.

In early January 1942, Stalin came to the conclusion that total victory over the Nazis could be achieved that very year. On 10 January Stalin dispatched a directive to his generals outlining, “Our task is not to give the Germans a breathing space, to drive them westwards without a halt, force them to exhaust their reserves before springtime when we shall have fresh big reserves, while the Germans will have no more reserves; this will ensure the complete defeat of the Nazi forces in 1942”. (30)

As events would show, such directives were too ambitious and underestimated the Wehrmacht’s resilience. Mawdsley wrote, “Stalin’s January 1942 strategy of wearing down German reserves before the spring did not work... In fact, however, on much of the front the Germans were able to hold on to the territory they had reached in early December 1941. Even at Rostov and Moscow, they had only had to fall back 50 to 150 miles. They were still very deep in Soviet territory. In the north and centre they would hold this line until late 1943”. (31)

Remarkably, by May 1944 German Army Group Centre was still only 290 miles from Moscow at its closest point; whereas Soviet forces were 550 miles from Berlin in the early summer of 1944. (32)

Notes

1 Evan Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East: The Nazi-Soviet War, 1941-1945* (Hodder Arnold, 23 Feb. 2007) p. 127

2 *Ibid.*, p. 147

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*, pp. 85-86

5 Robert Service, *Stalin: A Biography* (Pan; Reprints edition, 16 April 2010) p. 406

6 Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East*, p. 148

7 Andrei Gromyko, *Memories: From Stalin to Gorbachev* (Arrow Books Limited, 1 Jan. 1989) p. 216

8 Leopold Trepper, *The Great Game: Memoirs of a Master Spy* (Michael Joseph Ltd; First Edition, 1 May 1977) p. 67

9 Donald J. Goodspeed, *The German Wars* (Random House Value Publishing, 2nd edition, 3 April 1985) p. 407

10 *Ibid.*

11 Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East*, p. 110

12 Adolf Hitler, *Hitler's Table Talk*, New Foreword by Gerhard L. Weinberg (Enigma Books, 30 April 2008) p. 257

13 Goodspeed, *The German Wars*, p. 405

14 Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East*, p. 120

15 *Ibid.*

16 *Ibid.*, p. 128

17 Goodspeed, *The German Wars*, p. 404

18 Chris Bellamy, *Absolute War: Soviet Russia in the Second World War* (Pan; Main Market edition, 21 Aug. 2009) p. 332

19 *Ibid.*

20 *Ibid.*, p. 331

21 Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East*, p. 148

22 Ibid., p. 119

23 J. Neumann and H. Flohn, Great Historical Events That Were Significantly Affected by the Weather: Part 8, Germany's War on the Soviet Union, 1941-45. Long-range Weather Forecasts for 1941-42 and Climatological Studies, Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society, [Jstor](#)

24 John Toland, Adolf Hitler: The Definitive Biography (Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, 3 Feb. 2007) Part 8, The Fourth Horseman

25 Mawdsley, Thunder in the East, pp. 107-108

26 Ibid., p. 121

27 Goodspeed, The German Wars, pp. 405-406

28 Ibid., p. 406

29 Ibid., p. 407

30 Geoffrey Roberts, Stalin's Wars: From World War to Cold War, 1939-1953 (Yale University Press; 1st Edition, 14 Nov. 2006) p. 116

31 Mawdsley, Thunder in the East, p. 147

32 Samuel W. Mitcham Jr., Hitler's Field Marshals and Their Battles (Guild Publishers, 1988) p. 274

Chapter XIX

Red Army's Winter Campaign. Part II

Six weeks into the Soviet Army's counteroffensive, on 15 January 1942 Adolf Hitler at last agreed that German Army Group Centre could make a gradual, fighting withdrawal to a straighter and shorter line slightly further west of Moscow.

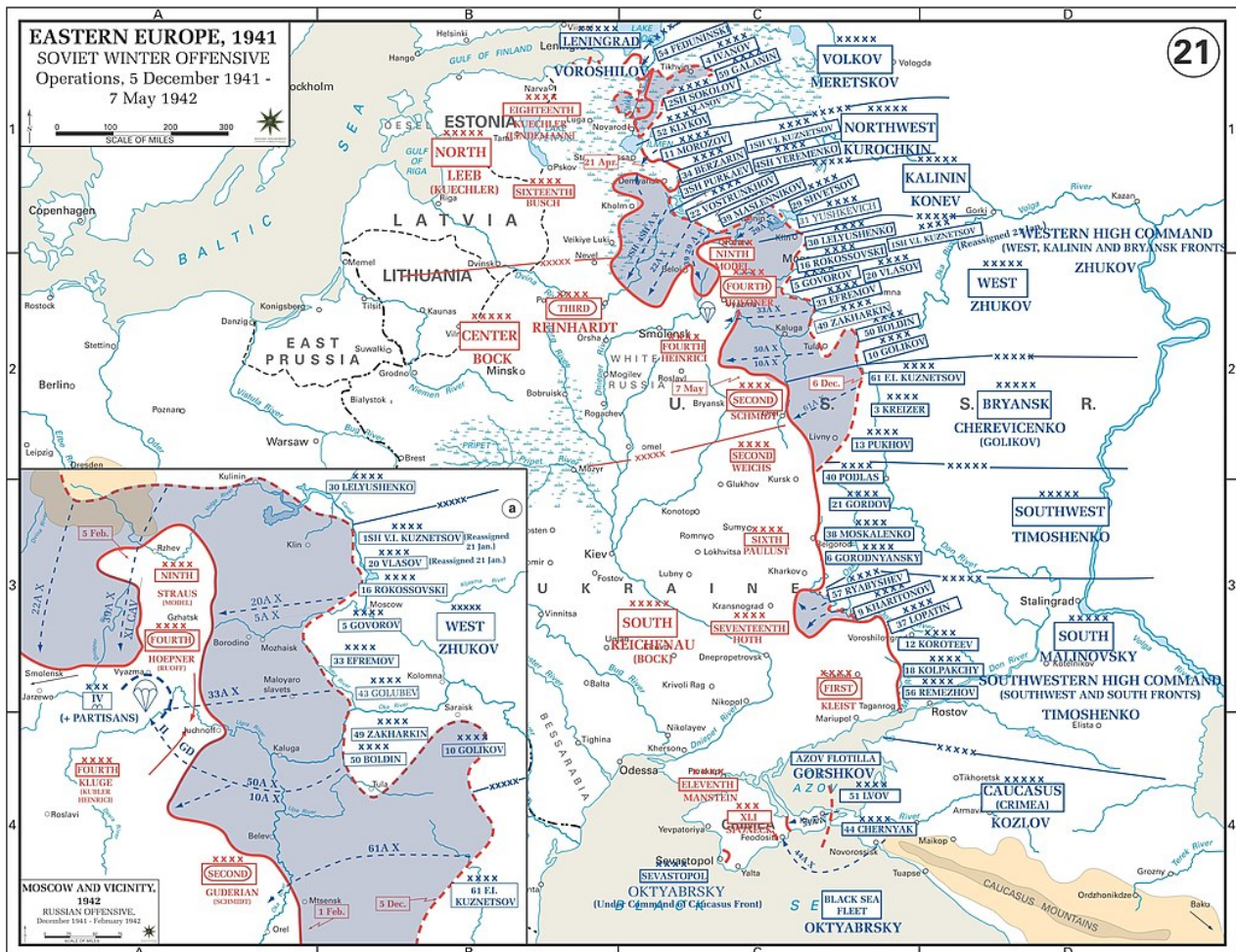
The Nazi hierarchy hoped that this would fortify the Wehrmacht's defensive position, and enable them to fend off continued Soviet counterattacks; in order to reconstitute German forces for another major offensive in the summer of 1942.

Hitler attributed the failure of his 1941 campaign to destroy the USSR as largely due to "a surprisingly early outbreak of a severe winter in the East" (1). He did not mention the crucial errors himself and the high command made regarding grand strategy, and neither did he give the Soviets credit for putting up a stronger showing than the Nazis had anticipated.

Nevertheless, the Russian winter of 1941-42 was far colder and longer than normal, and indeed was "one of the most severe winters on record", as noted in a paper co-authored by prominent climatologists (Jehuda Neumann and Hermann Flohn) with the Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society. (2)

A table produced in this study reveals that the temperature around Moscow, for the month

of November 1941, was on average a remarkable 6.8 degrees Celsius colder when compared to November 1940 (3). For December 1941, the temperature in Moscow was 5.2 degrees Celsius lower than 12 months before; and in January 1942, it was 6 degrees colder than January 1941. Even the month of March 1942 was appreciably colder than March 1941, showing a 3.6 degree lower temperature on average, with the thermometer still well under zero.



Map of the Soviet 1941-1942 winter counteroffensive. (Licensed under Public Domain)

These much colder than typical temperatures are similarly reflected in recordings posted at Leningrad, Soviet Russia's second largest city (4). However, the appalling weather was not the principal reason behind Operation Barbarossa's derailing. The Germans were pressed for time, and had been unable to reach their goals, mainly because of the strategic blunders committed by the German high command; such as stretching their forces over too broad a front on 22 June 1941, and two months later when Hitler on his own initiative delayed the advance on Moscow. The Blitzkrieg had slowed in large part because of this.

Military author Donald J. Goodspeed wrote,

"The German high command had attempted too many things at the same time. It had neglected the primary axiom of the single objective [taking Moscow]". (5)

Considering by late 1941 the Germans were deep inside the western Soviet Union, that they had not been given sufficient warm clothing, were experiencing problems with logistics and supplies, and had received barely any new fighting divisions, their performance that winter was quite incredible. In total during the three months of January to March 1942, the

Wehrmacht inflicted 620,000 casualties on the Red Army, according to British scholar Evan Mawdsley; the Germans in that same period lost 136,000 men, equating to 22% of Soviet personnel losses. (6)

It was the ongoing German ability, to exact heavy casualties on the Soviets, which ensured that Hitler and his military command remained confident they would emerge victorious from the war, particularly as the winter progressed and the Wehrmacht's position solidified. Goodspeed stated,

"It is impossible to withhold admiration from the German achievement in that terrible winter, an achievement much more significant than all the previous German victories. It is impossible to withhold admiration, but it is infinitely sad that men should have been called on to fight so well for so bad a cause". (7)

On 29 January 1942 General Georgy Zhukov, the Soviets' top commander, complained that he had so far lost 276,000 soldiers in the winter fighting, and received a mere 100,000 reinforcements (8). In his memoirs, Zhukov unceremoniously labelled the Russian counteroffensive "a Pyrrhic victory"; he criticised how the counterattack is often regarded as a Soviet triumph, calling it an "embellishment of history" and "a sad attempt to paint over failure" (9). The above casualty figures support the arguments of Zhukov.

While Zhukov's lamentations on not being granted enough replacements also seems justified, in the three months from December 1941 the Soviet Army was bolstered with 117 new divisions, a very high number (10). The leading enemy force, German Army Group Centre, received only 9 fresh divisions from December 1941 to March 1942.

Hitler was relieved to observe that the Germans' slow retirement of mid-January 1942 was successfully implemented. In the process, the Wehrmacht did suffer considerable losses in men and matériel. By 31 January 1942, total German casualties on the Eastern front came to 918,000, amounting to 28.7% of the original German invasion force of June 1941. (11)

In comparison, the Soviet Army at the end of 1941 had suffered almost five million casualties (12); that is the vast majority of the Red Army's personnel strength of mid-1941. The halting of the German advance had, meanwhile, breathed new life into anti-fascist guerrilla activities, especially those in Yugoslavia and Greece. The Resistance forces helped to tie down a few German divisions. The Wehrmacht had no such difficulties from the Western European nations under Nazi rule. The French, for example, sent a contingent to fight alongside the Germans against Soviet Russia. (13)

In an unforeseen twist of events, the positive outcome of Hitler's standfast directive of mid-December 1941 – in which he had ordered German commanders to deploy dynamite and other explosives to blast gaping holes in the frozen ground (14), to be used as defensive strongholds called "hedgehogs" – coupled with the successful action of 15 January 1942, appears to have augmented Hitler's status as the German Army's Supreme Commander.

Mawdsley acknowledged,

"Hitler came out better from these winter battles than Stalin did, at least within his own short-range terms. The 'standfast' policy saved his Eastern front. Ironically, the disaster at Moscow probably enhanced in the short term his reputation (and his self-estimation), as a war leader, although in a different way from the 1940 campaign in France. He

could claim to have saved the German Army from its own errors". (15)

On 19 December 1941 Hitler appointed himself Supreme Commander, replacing Field Marshal Walther von Brauchitsch. The latter had resigned due to heart trouble and the deteriorating circumstances in the East. Hitler insisted that,

"Anyone can issue a few tactical orders. The task of a Commander-in-Chief is to educate the army in the spirit of National Socialism. I don't know any general in the army who could do this as I want it done". (16)

Hitler's self-assignment as Nazi Germany's warlord was not at all bad news for the Russians. Having limited military experience, Hitler was bound to commit errors in the time ahead. In reality, the Nazi leader had been de facto Supreme Commander for months before December 1941.

On 10 January 1942, Joseph Stalin informed his generals in a directive that he expected "the complete defeat of the Nazi forces in 1942" (17). The Red Army's May Day slogan expounded, "In 1942 we will achieve the decisive defeat of the German-fascist forces". The Soviet leadership continued to state this aim was achievable "until at least late June 1942", Mawdsley wrote (18); despite the fact by then, the Germans were hundreds of miles deeper in Russian territory than Napoleon's Grand Armée had been in 1812.

As opposed to Hitler, however, Stalin possessed an extensive background in top military echelons, which would stand him in good stead as the war continued. English historian Geoffrey Roberts realised,

"Stalin was no general but he did have experience of high command in the field, and of serving in the combat zone, although not on the front line. During the Russian civil war he served as a political commissar, a representative of the communist party's central committee, responsible for securing and maintaining supplies for the Red Army, a job that involved him in high-level military decision-making". (19)

In January 1942, the Kremlin sought to inflict a fatal blow on the Nazis by executing a gigantic pincers movement, around the Russian towns of Rzhev and Vyazma. Such a move, had it been successful, would have led to the encirclement and destruction of the largest German force, Army Group Centre. Were the Soviets to achieve this, the war would have been virtually over (20). Partly because of the Russian plan, Hitler had reluctantly ordered his step-by-step withdrawal on 15 January.

The Soviets had already recaptured the Russian city of Kalinin (Tver) on 16 December 1941, 100 miles north-west of Moscow, followed by the strongpoint of Kaluga on 26 December, a similar distance south-west of Moscow. With Kalinin and Kaluga back in Soviet hands, Stalin and the Supreme high command (Stavka) now carried out their enveloping manoeuvre further west, focusing on Rzhev and Vyazma. These towns lie just over 130 miles west of Moscow.

Army Group Centre was not destined to be surrounded and destroyed. In bitter fighting the Germans held on to Rzhev. Their formidable commander, Walter Model, launched sustained and vigorous assaults against oncoming Soviet troops. Mawdsley wrote,

"General Walter Model was appointed to take over the 9th Army on the northern face of the German position... An officer of extraordinary abilities, Model began a meteoric rise,

and would establish himself as the German Army's best defensive specialist, Hitler's 'fireman'." (21)

Hitler repeatedly described Model as "the saviour of the Eastern front". For his successful action at Rzhev, the Führer personally awarded Model the Knights' Cross with Oak Leaves on 1 February 1942, and promoted him to Colonel-General (22). Model, trusted furthermore by Hitler because of his pro-Nazi stance, was the only commander who could persuade Hitler to sanction retreats, sweetened with a "Shield and Sword" policy.

Through this stratagem Model would suggest a withdrawal to Hitler, with the general then stressing that it be followed by a bold counterstroke, in which the lost territory would swiftly be recaptured, or so they hoped. German military staffs were frequently amazed, to witness how Model's Shield and Sword policy promptly convinced Hitler to authorise temporary retreats (23). Other generals risked being sacked for proposing as much.

Towards mid-January 1942, the Soviet 29th and 39th armies bypassed Rzhev, and advanced south-westwards in the direction of Vyazma. Further south again, General Zhukov's divisions approached Vyazma. Despite these threats, Vyazma remained under Nazi occupation, and the Soviet 29th and 39th armies were cut off behind German lines, as General Model closed the Rzhev gap (24). The Russian advance was halted and the pincers never closed.

A Russian attempt to overcome the German 9th Army was stopped in front of Vitebsk, in north-eastern Belarus. South of Leningrad, a Soviet offensive along the Volkhov river failed to reach its objectives, and resulted in the annihilation of the Soviet 2nd Assault Army (25). On 8 February 1942, six German divisions were surrounded by the Russians at the urban locality of Demyansk, 235 miles north-west of Moscow (26). The encircled Germans fought on, and their survival was made possible by Luftwaffe supplies of food and medicine dispatched from the air.

At the Russian town of Kholm, about 200 miles south of Leningrad, a mix of German Army and police units were surrounded in late January 1942, as the Soviet 33rd and 391st rifle divisions tightened the ring around Kholm (the Kholm Pocket). Over this town the besieged Germans were likewise reinforced with Luftwaffe aerial drops. They clung on to Kholm in spite of repeated Soviet assaults, heavy casualties and a sudden upsurge of exanthematic typhus, a lethal bacterial disease. (27)

The success of the Luftwaffe manoeuvres, at Demyansk and Kholm, may have assured Hitler the following winter that it would be possible to safeguard the German 6th Army trapped at Stalingrad (28). Certainly, the Demyansk and Kholm operations lent credence to the Nazi air chief Hermann Göring, who was heartened by the Luftwaffe showing here. Later, Göring was optimistic the same undertaking would be possible at Stalingrad, until the 6th Army could be relieved.

It did not prove so, for the German airfields were further away from Stalingrad than at Demyansk and Kholm. The 6th Army was also multiple times larger, and more mouths would need to be fed to sustain it.

Outbreaks of typhus in late winter, as had afflicted the Germans in the Kholm Pocket, was expected. Such occurrences were predicted accurately by Hitler's ally, the Romanian autocrat Marshal Ion Antonescu, who said on 13 November 1941, "In my experience exanthematic typhus breaks out in February. We must organize ourselves by then. We must

limit the area of the disease, send bath and delousing trains, because otherwise we will have a wide-scale epidemic in February... The disaster will come in February, when a person is weakened by the winter, because he has not fed himself properly". (29)

In the south-western USSR, on 31 December 1941 the Soviet 302nd Mountain Rifle Division, led by Colonel Mikhail K. Zubkov, liberated the city of Kerch in eastern Crimea. Over four months later, Kerch would be taken by the Germans again on 14 May 1942. In the Crimea's far south, General Erich von Manstein's German 11th Army had "occupied the shore of the Black Sea" and the Germans enjoyed "access to the wheat granaries of the Ukraine", Leopold Trepper wrote, a top level anti-Nazi intelligence agent. (30)

Manstein's forces were still stuck outside Sevastopol, the Crimea's biggest city, which resisted heroically. Sevastopol would not fall to the invaders until the high summer (31). The most promising Russian operation took place near Kharkov, the USSR's fourth largest city, which had been captured by the German 6th Army on 24 October 1941.

In the middle of January 1942, the Soviets launched twin attacks around Kharkov (32). The Germans managed to halt the northern Soviet arm at Belgorod, 45 miles north of Kharkov; but the Russians manufactured a deep wedge in the German lines near Izyum, about 70 miles south-east of Kharkov. Only after extended fighting was the Wehrmacht able to restore the situation, and prevent the Red Army from advancing southward on Kharkov, possibly retaking the city.

Notes

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Chapter XX

Nazi-Soviet War Destined to Become a Long War

During the fighting in the Soviet Winter Campaign, in mid-February 1942 the German Army had recovered its poise, as the situation stabilised for the invaders. Across the Eastern front, the Germans were able to hold on to most of the territory they had captured by early December 1941.

Astride the Russian cities of Rostov-on-Don and Moscow, where the Germans had received some of the heaviest hits of the Soviet Army's winter counteroffensive, the Wehrmacht had only fallen back between 50 to 150 miles (1). The Germans avoided the disaster that had struck Napoleon's invasion force, during their 1812 attack on Russia.

The Grande Armée failed to get through its first winter on Russian terrain, suffering complete defeat in December 1812. The Germans would survive 3 winters of fighting on Russian soil, a remarkable feat of arms. By May 1944 at their closest point the Germans were 290 miles from Moscow, while the Soviets were 550 miles from Berlin at that time. For example the Russian city of Pskov, 160 miles south of Leningrad, was not liberated by the Red Army until 23 July 1944. (2)

Military analyst Donald J. Goodspeed wrote that the German performance, in the winter of 1941-42, proved to be "much more significant than all the previous German victories" (3). This was because the Wehrmacht had prevented a collapse along the front, ensuring that the Second World War was now going to be an extended conflict – it would rumble on for considerably longer than "the Great War" (World War I), resulting in far more bloodshed and destruction than its predecessor.

Though the Nazis would be beaten in 1945 and Germany occupied and dissected, the weight of the blows they inflicted on the Soviet Union were a decisive factor in that state's eventual demise in 1991. English historian Chris Bellamy wrote that Soviet Russia did not fully recover from the struggle with the German war machine and "was a long-term casualty of the Great Patriotic War" (4). It could be argued, therefore, that the conflict was not an unmitigated defeat for Hitler's regime. Soviet military journals also state that the victory over the Nazis was achieved at a cost that was too great. (5)

Image on the right: Portrait photograph of Georgy Zhukov (Licensed under Public Domain)



The Red Army's counteroffensive of 1941-42 has often been regarded, through the decades, as a watershed Soviet triumph; but as Marshal Georgy Zhukov outlined in his memoirs, the reality on the ground does not support these claims. Between January to March 1942, the Germans inflicted more than four times as many casualties on the Red Army than the Wehrmacht had suffered, 620,000 losses as opposed to 136,000 (6). Zhukov described as "a Pyrrhic victory" the outcome of the Soviet counterattack. (7)

To use a sporting analogy, had the Nazi-Soviet War constituted a boxing match the Germans would have won by some distance on points scored. After 3 months of fighting, at the end of September 1941 the Soviet Army had suffered personnel losses of "at least 2,050,000", while German manpower losses by then "numbered 185,000", British historian Evan Mawdsley highlighted. (8)

From September to December 1941 the Soviets suffered 926,000 fatalities while, in the final quarter of the year, from October to December 1941 the Germans lost 117,000 men (9). Mawdsley, who has also presented these figures, revealed that "German losses on the Russian front in the last quarter of 1941, despite the onset of winter and the drama of the drive on Moscow, were lower than those in the summer... These fourth-quarter figures represented a ratio of losses between the Russians and Germans of as much as 8:1". (10)

In the first six months of 1942, a similar ratio prevailed in the war. From January to June 1942 the Germans inflicted 1.4 million casualties on the Soviets, as opposed to 188,000 casualties for the invaders (11). The great portion of blame, for the disparity in these figures, should not be attached to the frontline Russian (or Soviet) soldier. In both world wars, he proved overall to be a tough and resourceful fighter, capable of fanatical resistance. The responsibility lies ultimately with the state's long-time ruler, Joseph Stalin, who had taken it upon himself to purge the Soviet military's officer ranks beginning in May 1937; just when the spectre of war was about to envelop Europe once more, so the timing could hardly have been worse.

As the distinguished Soviet diplomat Andrei Gromyko recalled in his autobiography, Marshal Zhukov spoke bitterly after the war of "the enormous damage Stalin had inflicted on the country by his massacre of the top echelons of the army command" (12). Around 20,000 Soviet military officers and commissars had been arrested "and the greater part were executed", Mawdsley wrote (13). This is a smaller number than purported in Western

propaganda, but it was still significant, and the Red Army's senior commanders were of course disproportionately targeted.

The worst of the Red Army purges occurred between 1937-1938, but the arrests and executions continued right up to the eve of war with Nazi Germany on 22 June 1941, notably targeting the Soviet Air Force command (14). The result was that the Soviet military, despite lavish spending on armaments for years, was a weak instrument by the time the Germans attacked. The Red Army was desperately short of experienced and capable commanders, when they were needed most.

Mawdsley wrote of those that had been purged,

"These men possessed the fullest professional, educational and operational experience the Red Army had accumulated. They had presided over an extraordinary modernization of doctrine and matériel of the early 1930s. Despite professional and personal rivalries among themselves, these leaders had formed a fairly cohesive command structure. The paradox is that this was precisely why Stalin mistrusted them". (15)

Had the officers in question been organising a plot to overthrow Stalin, one could at least understand the latter's actions. Yet a coup does not seem to have been on the horizon. According to Zhukov, who knew some of the Soviet officers in question, those who had been liquidated were "innocent victims" (16). In addition, Zhukov wrote in his memoirs of "unfounded arrests in the armed forces" which were "in contravention of socialist legality" and this had "affected the development of our armed forces and their combat preparedness". (17)

Of those who remained in the Red Army's command structure, their initiative and ability to make independent decisions had been paralysed. It was an inevitable byproduct of the psychological damage inflicted by the purges also. Mawdsley realised "a mental state was imposed which was the very opposite of the German 'mission-oriented command system'", which encouraged and rewarded independent thinking. (18)

The Red Army purges convinced possible allies and enemies that the Soviet military was in disarray. Exploiting the circumstances, German agencies forwarded details of the purges to British and French intelligence (19). Hitler's own opinion that the Red Army was of poor quality strengthened in the winter of 1939-40, when he learned of the Soviet forces struggling to overcome a much smaller Finnish Army. The purges were a factor too behind the British and French refusal to sign a pact with Russia, in the late 1930s, which would have aligned those three states against Germany, as during the First World War.

The British and French leaders were, by and large, intensely anti-Bolshevik which can't be forgotten. The purges served as an excuse to increase their prejudices against communist Russia. Relating to the Anglo-French military hierarchy, Leopold Trepper, a leading former Red Army intelligence agent wrote in his memoirs, "I am inclined to think that the French and English chiefs of staff were less than impatient to seal a military alliance with the Soviet Union, because the weakness of the Soviet Army had become clear to them". (20)

This weakness was acknowledged not only by Zhukov but other top level Soviet military figures, like Marshal Kliment Voroshilov. In early October 1941 Voroshilov, the pre-war commander of the Red Army, told the Communist International (Comintern) leader Georgi

Dimitrov that the situation at the front is “awful”. Voroshilov went on that “our organisation is weaker than theirs. Our commanding officers are less well trained. The Germans succeed usually because of their better organisation and clever tricks”. (21)

Image below: Joseph Stalin (Licensed under Public Domain)



The Soviet cause had been hindered too, by Stalin’s refusal to believe the intelligence reports warning of an imminent German invasion. The most plausible intelligence material regarding Nazi intentions came from Soviet agents, such as Trepper, Richard Sorge and Harro Schulze-Boysen, all of whom informed the Kremlin about Operation Barbarossa.

The reports converged and showed an obvious pattern, peaking in intensity and accuracy in the first 3 weeks of June 1941; but Stalin continued to discount the intelligence information sent to him personally. A few days before the Germans invaded, in mid-June 1941 Stalin told Zhukov, “I believe that Hitler will not risk creating a second front for himself by attacking the Soviet Union” (22). Also revealing is that when Stalin was awakened and informed of heavy German shelling along the Nazi-Soviet border, he said, “Hitler surely doesn’t know about it”. (23)

The Germans achieved a major element of surprise in their invasion, advancing quicker and inflicting more damage than they would otherwise have been able to. When the Axis forces swarmed over the frontiers, many Soviet troops were either on leave, separated from their artillery, overrun and taken prisoner before they could mount an effective defence. Within a week of the invasion, the Soviets had suffered about 600,000 casualties and the Germans had advanced more than halfway to Moscow.

Three and a half weeks into the attack, by 16 July 1941 the Wehrmacht was more than two-thirds of the way to the Soviet capital, having reached the city of Smolensk in western Russia, 230 miles from Moscow as the crow flies. Robert Service, an historian of Russian history, wrote how “A military calamity had occurred on a scale unprecedented in the wars of the twentieth century” (24). It is conventionally believed, for an offensive to succeed decisively, that the attackers should outnumber the defenders by 3 to 1 (25). This was certainly not the case in the Nazi-Soviet War, and it offers one crucial reason as to why the

German invasion would fail.

The Germans and their Axis allies (mainly Romanians and Finns at first) attacked the USSR with 3,767,000 men; the Soviet military's personnel strength on the eve of war, taking in the whole of the USSR, amounted to 5,373,000, of which 4,261,000 belonged to the ground forces, the remainder to the air force and navy (26). By the end of 1941, the Germans had virtually destroyed the original 5 million strong Soviet military. However, there was a reserve force to be called upon of 14 million Soviet citizens who, it must be said, had only basic military training; among the Red Army reservists were a million women, about half of them present on the frontline in a variety of roles (27). The Soviet Union's population was more than 190 million in 1941, not far away from being double that of the Reich's population.

The Soviet military possessed much larger numbers of tanks, airplanes and artillery than the Germans and their allies. Stalin must be given due credit here, because he had overseen the USSR's armament drive since the early 1930s. Spending on the Soviet defence budget increased by 340% in absolute terms from 1932 to 1937, and expenditure on arms doubled again between 1937 and 1940. (28)

Directly involved in the fighting at the war's outset were 11,000 Soviet tanks, in opposition to 4,000 Axis tanks, 9,100 Soviet combat aircraft compared to 4,400 Axis combat aircraft, and 19,800 Soviet artillery pieces as opposed to 7,200 Axis artillery pieces (29). The German-led armies, on paper, should have been at a clear disadvantage from the beginning.

The size of the USSR's landmass was a further critical factor in Barbarossa's failure. Russia by itself is easily the world's largest country, but the Germans assailed other states like the Ukraine (Europe's second biggest country today), and they also entered Belarus and the Baltic nations. Had the Red Army been concentrated in an area the size of France, the Wehrmacht would most probably have been victorious within a reasonably short space of time.

The farther that the Germans advanced into the western Soviet Union, the broader the land became, a vast expanse opening up in front of them. This was increasingly the case when an invading force attacked across the whole front. While the Germans could do nothing about the terrain's breadth, they could have shortened the distance by directing their 3 Army Groups in a straight thrust towards Moscow, the USSR's transportation and communications hub.

By the second half of August 1941, forward units of German Army Group Centre were just 185 miles from Moscow (30). The Wehrmacht's real weakness was its high command's strategic shortcomings, compounded by Hitler's interference, most fatefully his directive of 21 August 1941 – when the Nazi leader postponed the advance on Moscow in order to capture Leningrad, Kiev and the Crimea among other goals. (31)

This directive, a pivotal turning point in the entire war, resulted in a 6 week delay in the approach towards Moscow. It meant in the end that the capital went uncaptured by the Nazis, and the Soviet Union as a result would survive the war, though a long and difficult struggle lay ahead.

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Chapter XXI

Overview of the Nazi-Soviet War in Early 1942

By the beginning of 1942 Adolf Hitler had led Nazi Germany into a desperate situation, from which there was probably no escape. At the time, this was not easily apparent to the Wehrmacht or the German population, nor indeed to the Third Reich's enemies, particularly those in the West.

The failure of Nazi Germany's Army Groups to deliver a lethal blow against Soviet Russia in 1941, meant that the Wehrmacht had missed its chance to win the war; and well prior to the defeat at Stalingrad, which confirmed to the world that the Germans were unlikely to emerge victorious. As 1942 began, the sands of time were moving rapidly against the Nazis and their Axis allies, principally Benito Mussolini's Italy and Ion Antonescu's Romania, both of whom were dependent on German success to ensure their own survival.

The Soviet Union of Joseph Stalin, with its greater industrial power and much larger population than the Reich, could only strengthen as the conflict continued and the Germans could only weaken. However, the USSR itself would never completely recover from the devastation inflicted by the Wehrmacht on their state, at a minimum 25 million Soviet deaths suffered and tens of thousands of towns destroyed (1); along with the effort simply expended in the struggle against the German war machine.

English historian Chris Bellamy wrote that the Nazi-Soviet War had ongoing implications, not merely for Germany but for Russia too, and was a leading factor which "ultimately broke the Soviet Union" in 1991. The other central cause behind the USSR's disintegration was "the

succeeding struggle against the West – which followed without any respite”. (2)

Bellamy recognised that Soviet Russia “was a long-term casualty of the Great Patriotic War [1941–45]” (3). Had Hitler known this as he raised a pistol to his head in the Führerbunker, and furthermore that the Soviet Union would collapse without a shot fired, he presumably would have gone to his grave in a more serene state of mind. Russian military journals conceded that the Soviet victory over the Germans was achieved at too great a cost. (4)

During the Nazi-Soviet War, the turning of the tide took far longer than Stalin and his regime had expected. From January 1942 until the high summer, the Soviet hierarchy continued to claim complete triumph was achievable over the Wehrmacht that year (5). The Germans proved to be made of sterner material than Napoleon’s army, in their ill-fated 1812 attack on Russia.

The lingering effects of Stalin’s purges of the Red Army high command (1937–41) should not be underestimated. After the war, Marshal Georgy Zhukov said the purges had inflicted “enormous damage” on “the top echelons of the army command” (6). As Zhukov knew, the repercussions were felt strongly in the war with Nazi Germany. The Red Army had a shortage of top class commanders. It was further deprived of the initiative to make independent decisions when needed, especially early in the conflict against Nazism when Stalin was personally caught by surprise with the German invasion.

Moreover, British scholar Evan Mawdsley observed, “the purges made foreign governments – potential allies as well as potential enemies – assume that the Red Army was a broken shell” (7). The British and French presumed it to be so. As did Hitler’s Germany who had taken advantage of the circumstances.

Red Army intelligence agent Leopold Trepper wrote in his memoirs,

“The Germans exploited this situation to the full, instructing their Intelligence Services to convey to Paris and London the alarming facts – and they really were alarming – on the state of the Red Army after the purges”. (8)

It was the case also that the purges were a factor which influenced Hitler to attack the USSR, on 22 June 1941, otherwise he may have held off until 1942 or later. Proof of the damage imparted on the Soviet armed forces was evident in the Winter War with Finland (30 November 1939–13 March 1940), which the Soviet authorities had predicted would last for between 10 to 12 days. (9)

The Nazis were subsequently confident that a war against Soviet Russia would be a routine one. This confidence grew after the German divisions brushed aside French and British forces, during the summer 1940 Battle of France.

With 1942 continuing from its opening weeks the German high command, on paper at least, still had cause for hope. Most of eastern Europe and European Russia was under Nazi occupation, and there was no immediate threat of a large-scale Anglo-American landing in the West. Though by some distance the world’s strongest country, America and its war industry was shifting slowly into gear after the Great Depression, and would not reach its potential until late in the global conflict.

Much to Stalin’s dismay and frustration, it was the Japanese, and not the Germans, who would then endure the brunt of US industrial might. Stalin and his entourage’s growing

suspicions, that the Anglo-American powers hoped the Nazi-Soviet War would last for years, were based on well-founded concerns.

This desire had already been expressed in part by Harry S. Truman, future US president, hours after the Wehrmacht had invaded the Soviet Union.

Truman, then a US Senator, said he wanted to see the Soviets and Germans “kill as many as possible” between themselves, an attitude which the New York Times later called “a firm policy” (10). The Times had previously published Truman’s remarks on 24 June 1941, and as a result his views would most likely not have escaped the Soviets’ attention.

The area of landmass conquered by Nazi Germany increased substantially again through 1942. Expanding to its peak, the Third Reich’s territory was equal to the size of terrain conquered by the legendary Macedonian king, Alexander the Great, in the 4th century BC (11). Alexander the Great had ruled over a land area from the eastern Mediterranean all of the way to north-western India. Hitler’s dominion stretched across the entirety of continental Europe, much of north Africa and had breached into the fringes of western Asia.

As early as 18 October 1941, the Germans had taken captive at least 3 million Soviet troops. Bellamy noted,

“The total of 3 million was almost 10 times the figure of 378,000 admitted by Stalin on 6 November [1941], on the eve of the twenty-fourth anniversary of the 1917 October revolution. By the end of 1941, 3.8 million Soviet servicemen and women had surrendered or been captured”. (12)

Stalin was not assuming responsibility for the fall of Kiev, in the middle of September 1941, which had resulted in 665,000 Soviet soldiers taken prisoner by the Germans, an unequalled number in the military annals. By refusing to allow the Ukrainian capital to be abandoned for strategic reasons, Stalin had overruled the pleas of commanders like Zhukov and Semyon Budyonny. The latter was a distinguished cavalryman, but this did not prevent Budyonny from being scapegoated for the Kiev calamity and sacked on 13 September 1941.

Geoffrey Roberts, a specialist in Soviet history, wrote that

“Stalin fully shared these misconceptions and, as Supreme Commander, bore ultimate responsibility for their disastrous practical consequences. As A.J.P. Taylor noted [a British historian], Stalin’s dedication to the doctrine of the offensive ‘brought upon the Soviet armies greater catastrophes than any other armies have ever known’. There were many occasions, too, when it was Stalin’s personal insistence on the policy of no retreat, and of counterattack at all costs, that resulted in heavy Soviet losses”. (13)

Among Hitler’s goals for the 1942 offensive was to deal a devastating blow on the Red Army, by destroying its divisions in the south-western USSR; and thereafter seizing control of the Soviet oil fields of the Caucasus, primarily at Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan. The fossil fuel sources there supplied the Soviet Union with almost 90% of its fuel, a remarkable total. Roberts outlined,

“Unlike in 1941, Hitler did not necessarily expect to win the war in the east in 1942” (14). He did expect to place the Reich in an insurmountable position, self-sufficient by enjoying mastery over rich oil deposits and, in doing so, depriving Soviet Russia of those reserves.

Should they fail Hitler acknowledged, "If we do not capture the oil supplies of the Caucasus by the autumn, then I shall have to face the fact that we cannot win this war" (15). German plans for the 1942 summer campaign expounded that the Russian infiltrations, behind Wehrmacht lines, were to be wiped out once and for all. The surrounded German garrisons in the Russian towns of Demyansk and Kholm were to be relieved, and the Soviet pocket at Volkhov, 70 miles east of Leningrad, was earmarked for eradication. (16)

German objectives further stated that the 60 mile Soviet salient near the city of Izyum, in eastern Ukraine, should be cleared of Russian forces; as would the Kerch peninsula in the east of Crimea, while the city of Sevastopol in southern Crimea was to be taken.

The German Army of 1942 was still very powerful, and it remained much stronger than its Soviet counterpart. Between January and June 1942, the Germans would inflict 1.4 million casualties on the Soviet Army, while in those same 6 months the Wehrmacht lost 188,000 men, Mawdsley highlighted (17). The Germans therefore had less than one-seventh (13.4%) of Soviet personnel losses during the first half of 1942.

The German high command had contemplated remaining on the defensive through 1942, so as to build up its strength to something like that of 1941. The primary argument against this once more loomed large, in that the Germans could not afford to let the war drag on indefinitely, and had no alternative but to revert to attack.

The maximum Russian goal in the Winter Campaign was to encircle and annihilate German Army Group Centre, the largest and strongest Wehrmacht force. Were this achieved, the war would have been practically decided in the Russians' favour in 1942, but it was not to be. By late January 1942 it was clear the operation had failed, largely because of robust counterstrokes launched by the German 9th Army commander, Walter Model, known as Hitler's "fireman" (18). The less ambitious but realistic Russian aim, supported by Zhukov, of forcing the enemy back to the city of Smolensk, 230 miles west of Moscow, also fell short of being reached.

At the beginning of February 1942, the Eastern front was stabilising, and the threat of a capitulation akin to that suffered by Napoleon had disappeared. The German high command achieved this in part by removing tired commanders when necessary, and replacing them with energetic and skilful officers (19). Perhaps most notably General Model and Field Marshal Günther von Kluge, the new commander of Army Group Centre, who had replaced the disgruntled Fedor von Bock on 19 December 1941. Mawdsley described the 59-year-old von Kluge as "one of Hitler's most talented and effective leaders". (20)

In the second week of February 1942, Field Marshal von Kluge issued a positive report about Army Group Centre's fighting capacity. This account was accurate and warmly received by Hitler and the military staff at the Wolf's Lair headquarters. The Germans had altogether lost 48,000 men in January 1942, hardly a shattering number (21). In mid-February 1942, Hitler informed his commanders that the "danger of a panic in the 1812 sense" was "eliminated". (22)

Most senior German officers agreed with Hitler's wish to instigate another offensive for 1942 but, as the year before, they favoured a major drive through the centre – in order to finally capture Moscow, the heartbeat of Soviet Russia, which had narrowly eluded the invaders at the start of December 1941. The centre of Moscow was just 100 miles from the most advanced German positions (23). If the capital went uncaptured, the Soviet Union would

remain in the war beyond 1942. The taking of Stalingrad would not have changed that.

Hitler had recklessly postponed Army Group Centre's march on Moscow in August 1941, instead dispatching separate panzer formations northward and southward towards Leningrad and Kiev. Undeterred, he intended reverting to this plan for 1942, of holding in the middle and attacking on the flanks; but Hitler accepted (for the time being) that he would have to be less grandiose than in 1941, because his armies were now not as large. The Nazi leader temporarily put to one side capturing Leningrad by storm, so the city would continue to be strangled and bombarded.

In March 1942, after nine months of fighting, the Germans had suffered 1.1 million casualties, a fraction of Soviet losses, but still serious (24). Of the German casualties, by 20 February 1942 about 10% of them (112,627) comprised of frostbite victims (25). This was not surprising in the midst of one of the worst Russian winters ever recorded.

German losses were insufficiently replenished during the winter fighting, with Army Group Centre receiving a modest 9 fresh divisions. Hitler could not restrain himself, however, and he was encouraged by General Erwin Rommel's victories in North Africa: such as the recapturing in late January 1942 of Benghazi, Libya's second largest city on the Mediterranean coast.

Before long, Hitler was dreaming not only of advancing through the Caucasus, but of linking up with Rommel's panzers in North Africa – and then advancing to the oil rich Middle East nations of Iran and Iraq, while another thrust was to be implemented along the Caspian Sea in the direction of Afghanistan and India. (26)

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Part II

The Asia-Pacific War

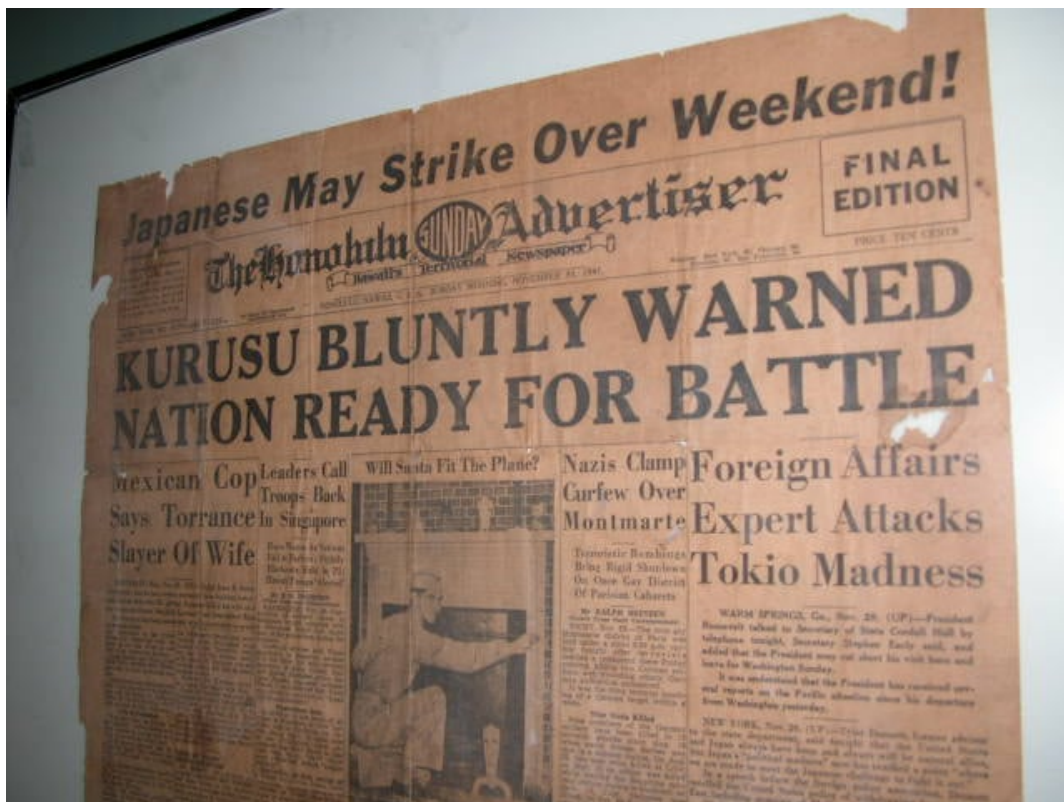
Chapter XXII

Pearl Harbor and the Early Japanese Advances

From the outset of World War II, the Franklin Roosevelt administration envisaged that America would emerge from the conflict in a position of global dominance. The United States had boasted the world's largest economy since 1871, surpassing Britain that year, and the gap increased through the early 20th century and beyond.

Diplomatic historian Geoffrey Warner summarised, "President Roosevelt was aiming at United States hegemony in the postwar world".

From 1939, high-level US State Department officials highlighted which regions of the globe the US would hold sway over, titled by Washington planners as the Grand Area. In the early 1940s, the Grand Area of US dominion was assigned to consist of the following regions: the entire Western hemisphere, the Far East, and the former British Empire which contained most crucially of all, the Middle East's oil sources.



President Roosevelt made deliberate and significant steps towards war during 1941. On 11 March of that year he signed into law the Lend-Lease Act which, for the majority, would benefit Britain by furnishing her with vast quantities of war matériel, oil and food supplies (amounting to around \$30 billion in all); to a much lesser extent, US deliveries of such commodities were sent to the Soviet Union from December 1941, months after the Germans invaded, and it would come to about \$10 billion altogether; despite the Soviets bearing the war's burden from June 1941.

The German Army's high command, on hearing of the Lend-Lease Act, believed in general that it "may be regarded as a declaration of war on Germany", and Hitler also "agreed that the Americans had given him a reason for war" with the introduction of Lend-Lease, according to Ian Kershaw, the English historian. Through 1941 a state of almost undeclared hostilities existed between America and Nazi Germany, as their vessels dangerously rubbed shoulders with each other in the Atlantic Ocean. War against America was officially declared by Hitler, a few days after Imperial Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor.

The Japanese militarists viewed the Lend-Lease Act with grave misgivings too. Their opinions were strengthened further when, on 26 July 1941, Roosevelt's government froze all Japanese assets in America, a cruel and drastic move which immediately eradicated 90% of Japan's oil imports and 75% of its foreign trade. Britain and the Netherlands followed suit. The date 26 July 1941 was not one "which will live in infamy", as Roosevelt later described Japan's bombing of Pearl Harbor, rather it was forgotten, in the West at least but not in Japan.

Roosevelt's decision to freeze Japanese assets, in response to Tokyo's occupation of southern French Indochina (over 8,000 miles from Washington), amounted to a virtual declaration of war on Japan. For a resource-poor nation of 73 million people dependent on food and petroleum imports, Japan had for example only an 18 month supply of oil left.

It was no shock, therefore, that when the Japanese cabinet discussed the options open for it, they shifted towards war with America and further conquests. Military author Donald J. Goodspeed wrote, "In the light of the evidence, it seems probable that in the autumn of 1941 Roosevelt wanted war – against Nazi Germany if possible, but if necessary against both Germany and Japan. He maintained the economic stranglehold on Japan, and refused to relax it except on terms he knew Japan would not meet".

Already in November 1940, a US military plan to "bomb Tokyo and other big cities" met the warm endorsement of Cordell Hull, the US Secretary of State, and Roosevelt himself was "simply delighted" when informed of the idea. With this intention in mind, from July 1941 increasing numbers of American B-17 heavy bombers were sent to US air bases, like in the Philippines, just over 1,000 miles south of Japan. The Japanese were of course aware of this hostile military build-up, and we can note there was no Japanese military presence in the Western hemisphere.

On 26 November 1941, just 11 days before the Pearl Harbor attack, Roosevelt consciously made war with Japan a certainty. Secretary of State Hull told the Japanese envoys, Saburo Kurusu and Kichisaburo Nomura, that a "general peaceful settlement" between America and Japan could only be reached should Tokyo – among other things – withdraw its armies from China and French Indochina, and effectively revoke its membership of the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy, while recognising the US-backed Chinese government of Chiang Kai-shek. These proposals were totally unacceptable to Japan's administration and the country's commanders.

Goodspeed wrote of the Roosevelt government's offer of 26 November that it "made war inevitable and it was intended to do so. For two days after the receipt of the American reply, the Japanese cabinet debated the issue, but on the 29th [of November] it reached a firm decision to go to war"; while Japan's resolution to take up arms against America "was also an indirect result of the rapacity of the industrialized West, which had led the way in the exploitation of China and the corruption of Japan".

On 25 November 1941 the US Secretary of War, Henry L. Stimson, wrote in his diary that he and colleagues had pondered at a White House meeting on that day "how we should maneuver them [the Japanese] into the position of firing the first shot, without allowing too much danger to ourselves". Stimson continued that Roosevelt "brought up the event that we were likely to be attacked perhaps next Monday [1 December 1941], for the Japanese are notorious for making an attack without warning, and the question was what we should do".

The Japanese Army was, itself, artificially inculcated with the extreme samurai traditions of the ancient warrior class. The military wielded a huge influence on Japanese policy. Japan's army leaders were, on the whole, poorly informed of world affairs, and dismissive of the materialism and perceived softness of America. They were also grossly overconfident in their armed forces.

The Japanese Navy leadership were more realistic, because they were regular travellers who had a better understanding of the world before them. The Japanese strategy for war against America was designed by the commander-in-chief of the Combined Fleet, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, an experienced and popular officer aged in his mid-50s. Admiral Yamamoto knew quite clearly that his country could not decisively defeat America in a conflict.

What Yamamoto proposed for Japan was a limited but still ambitious war aim: the establishment of a defensive perimeter in the Pacific Ocean, stretching out in a giant arc from the north-east to the south-west, from the Kuril Islands to the borders of India. This would enhance Japan's status as a major power, but could not have prevented America from attaining pre-eminence across much of the remainder of the globe.

Within this final Japanese line lay various countries they would take over or retain, including the Philippines, British Malaya (Malaysia), Burma, Indochina and, of greatest significance, oil rich Indonesia (Dutch East Indies). If Japan could secure this area in the first three or four months of their war with America, it should be possible to consolidate a powerful defensive barrier the US would dare not breach. Or so that is what Yamamoto hoped. He advocated a surprise attack on the US military, similar to the Japanese assault which destroyed the Russian fleet at Port Arthur in 1904.

Yamamoto boldly picked out the formidable US naval base at Pearl Harbor in Oahu, Hawaii, 3,865 miles from Tokyo and 2,580 miles from the American mainland coast at Los Angeles, California. Yet in his planning, Yamamoto committed two serious errors – he misjudged how a surprise raid on US forces would be viewed in America, which in the event united the US Congress and the American people firmly behind Roosevelt; and Yamamoto underestimated the true potential of US industry which, within two or three years, would easily outstrip that of Japan.

The 54-year-old Vice Admiral, Chuichi Nagumo, commanded the Japanese fleet which would attack Pearl Harbor. His task force set sail on 18 November 1941. Almost three weeks later at 5.30 am on 7 December, a Sunday, Japan's assault force neared its launch area. Two Japanese reconnaissance planes flew south to observe the Pearl Harbor base, and reported back that all was quiet.

Despite Washington having cracked Japanese codes in 1940, including Tokyo's highest diplomatic code, the Purple Cipher, US personnel at Pearl Harbor were not informed of the imminent Japanese attack. This was an incredible occurrence. Neither the direct scramble telephone, nor the US naval radio communications, were used to contact the American officers at Pearl Harbor. A warning message, not marked urgent, was instead sent through a much slower medium, as Kershaw noted via "Western Union's commercial telegram service, which had no direct line to Honolulu [Hawaiian capital]. It had still not arrived in Hawaii when the attack began".

From 230 miles north of their target, the opening wave of Japanese warplanes departed from their aircraft carriers shortly after 7 am. As they reached Pearl Harbor, below them

were the US Pacific Fleet warships, lined up neatly and close together, as though the world had never been at war. The first group of Japanese aircraft descended at 7:55 am. They bombed and strafed to their hearts content for 30 minutes. A mere 25% of the US anti-aircraft guns at Pearl Harbor had crews to fire the weaponry. Most of them were on shore leave, as previously agreed by Admiral Husband E. Kimmel, commander of the US Pacific Fleet.



Within minutes, the US Pacific Fleet was in tatters. The Japanese bombs had set aflame the battleships, 'Arizona', 'Oklahoma', 'California', and the 'West Virginia', all of which were in the process of sinking. Likewise in flames and going under were three US cruisers, three destroyers, and some ships of smaller size. Heavy damage was inflicted upon the American battleships the 'Nevada', 'Maryland', 'Tennessee' and 'Pennsylvania'.

The second wave of Japanese aircraft arrived over Pearl Harbor at 8:40 am. Along the nearby air fields, Japan's bombers destroyed 188 US warplanes, most of them on the ground. By the time the Japanese pilots had returned to their aircraft carriers at 11:30 am, 2,403 Americans were dead, while the Japanese had lost 29 planes out of 350 and suffered 64 deaths.

The Pearl Harbor attack was a severe blow to American pride and naval power, but it was not a deadly one. Pearl Harbor's installations such as the submarine pens were undamaged, as were the large oil tanks in the dockyard. Of major importance, the three American aircraft carriers were by luck out to sea at the time. Their survival would allow the US military to rapidly launch offensive operations. Nevertheless, Japan's commanders were pleased with the devastation inflicted at Pearl Harbor, which had exceeded their expectations.

The Japanese generals did not rest on their laurels either, and morale was very high among their troops. A few hours before the bombing of Pearl Harbor had even started, the Japanese 25th Army (commanded by Lieutenant-General Tomoyuki Yamashita) landed at British Malaya in south-east Asia. On 8 December 1941, the Japanese 15th Army (Lieutenant-General Shojiro Iida) led the way in invading neutral Thailand, just a few hundred miles north of Malaya. Thailand, which until then had escaped colonisation, capitulated quickly

and signed a formal alliance with Japan.

Four hours after the bombing of Pearl Harbor ended, the Japanese 14th Army (Lieutenant-General Masaharu Homma) attacked the Philippines, a south-east Asian country and US colony since the late 19th century. Much to their delight, Japan's troops destroyed dozens of US aircraft on the ground at Clark Air Base, in the northern Philippines.

On 10 December 1941 Japanese soldiers landed at Luzon, the Philippines' largest and most populous island in the north of the country. On that same day, 10 December, the Japanese 55th Infantry Division (Major-General Tomitaro Horii) captured the strategically important Pacific island of Guam from the Americans, almost 1,500 miles to the east of the Philippines. So for now ended the four decade US occupation of Guam.

Another 1,500 miles further east again in the Pacific a US territorial possession, Wake Island, was taken comfortably by Japanese marines from the outnumbered Americans on 23 December 1941. Christmas that year was not celebrated with wild enthusiasm in America.

On 16 December 1941 Borneo, the world's third largest island and less than 1,000 miles south of the Philippines, was attacked by Japanese units comprising mainly of the 35th Infantry Brigade (Major-General Kiyotake Kawaguchi). Landing in north-western Borneo, the Japanese met little resistance from the British, and they swiftly took the coastal towns of Miri and Seria.

Further north, Hong Kong, in south-eastern China, a British colony from the days of London's drug trafficking wars, was assailed by Japan's forces on the morning of 8 December 1941, led by the Japanese 23rd Army (Lieutenant-General Takashi Sakai). The Battle of Hong Kong turned into a rout, as the Japanese captured at least 10,000 Allied troops, among them British, Free French and Canadians. The myth of the white man's invincibility was evaporating like mist in a morning breeze.

On Christmas Day 1941 Mark Aitchison Young, the British Governor of Hong Kong, surrendered in person to Lieutenant-General Sakai, the victorious commander of the Japanese 23rd Army. Much to Winston Churchill's disappointment, the Allied soldiers at Hong Kong withstood Japan's rampaging troops for just 18 days. Britain's century-long rule over Hong Kong was broken.

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Chapter XXIII

The Japanese Assault on Northern Malaya

On 19 January 1942, the British prime minister Winston Churchill was shocked and disturbed to learn, for the first time, and after more than two years of Britain being at war, that absolutely no field defences had been constructed on the landward side of Singapore, in case of enemy attack. The news that reached Churchill seemed incredible, but it was true, nor should it have been news.

The Churchill cabinet's failure to sufficiently safeguard Singapore, a vitally important island and British colony in south-east Asia, was the latest calamity to afflict Britain's underwhelming war effort. The British had been outperformed by German troops in Norway, in France, in Greece, and now they were facing further setbacks against Nazi Germany's Axis partner, Imperial Japan.

The English hierarchy, and Churchill especially, had believed the Japanese would dare not engage in military operations against the Western powers. Such a scenario meant war with the United States, the world's strongest country. Churchill, in fact, thought Japan would be mad to initiate a conflict against America, and one can understand his reasoning on this point.

Yet the Japanese, hemmed in by US expansionism in the Eastern hemisphere, and with their access to petroleum almost entirely severed by the Roosevelt administration's provocative policies, was left with scant breathing space in the end. Japanese military personnel with a good knowledge of the world, primarily those in its navy leadership, knew perfectly well they had little chance of winning an outright war with America; but a sense of fatalism and of being trapped drove them on.

By 1939 the city of Singapore had a population of nearly 1.4 million people, a surprisingly high number (1). Singapore was nicknamed "the Gibraltar of the East" and "the key to the Pacific", and was situated at the southern tip of British Malaya (today consisting mostly of Malaysia), a peninsula over 400 miles long reaching from southern Thailand to Singapore; the latter of which is separated from the Malayan mainland only by the extremely narrow

Strait of Johore.



Singapore in 1945 (Licensed under Public Domain)

Before the First World War, Singapore was nothing more than a commercial harbour, but during the interwar years it came to be recognised as a crucial area of operations. From the early 1920s, Singapore was regarded by London as the most visible symbol of its power in the Far East. (2)

Singapore was ideally placed at the strategic chokepoint, from the South China Sea into the Indian Ocean. Prior to 1940, the island was far enough away from the closest Japanese bases to offer it protection from land and air attack. Furthermore, Singapore had become a key Royal Navy dockyard, barracks and communications centre (3). Since the 1920s, London had poured more than £60 million into fortifying Singapore, a considerable sum at the time.

Britain's wealth across the generations was accumulated by pursuing certain abhorrent actions. The American historian Noam Chomsky said "when nations are out for themselves, that's what you find. That's why Britain became very rich. It started in the Elizabethan era with piracy. But then it turned to the most vicious forms of slavery in human history. First in the British Caribbean islands, then the American South. That's why Britain pretty much supported the Confederacy. When they lost that, Egypt, then India. Then England turned to the largest narco-trafficking operation in human history, conquered more of India to try to monopolise the opium trade. So take a look at British wealth - robbery on the high seas; a hideous system of slavery, narco-trafficking. A very wealthy country". (4)

After World War I, Britain's elites had highlighted Japan as a potential threat to their empire. This feeling had strengthened with passing years, as Japan enlarged its dominion through military conquests, primarily in Manchuria and eastern China through the 1930s; which the Western powers viewed as encroachment into their own imperial designs in east Asia. The Japanese military command was well aware this rivalry was occurring quite close to Japan's frontiers, and that they had no presence at all in the Western hemisphere.

The Nazi routing of France, from May to June 1940, ensured the French possessions in southeast Asia would officially come under the control of the pro-German and pro-Axis Vichy regime. This was of major significance to Japan, as their forces swiftly occupied northern French Indochina in September 1940, and then in July 1941, the southern portion of French Indochina. (5)

From Britain's viewpoint, Tokyo's acquisition of all of Indochina massively increased the threat to regions like Malaya and Singapore. The new Japanese air and naval bases, in Indochina, were now within a few hundred miles striking distance of the British colonies to the south. In November 1940 a secret British report, intercepted by the Germans, was forwarded to Tokyo from Berlin, which revealed that Britain would not be able to dispatch strong reinforcements to Singapore in the event of war. (6)

During the weeks after Churchill had assumed power on 10 May 1940, he decided the top priority was the defence of Britain, which was under the spectre of a German invasion. With the Fall of France and rapidly deteriorating situation of the war, Churchill was not in a position to send a large fleet to east Asia, should a crisis strike there (7). Ever since that fateful date of 26 July 1941, when Washington had imposed a punishing oil and trade embargo on Japan – which amounted to a virtual declaration of war in itself – a full blown conflict between the Japanese and Anglo-American states was inevitable.

Britain's colonialists generally viewed the Japanese with contempt. Military historian Antony Beevor wrote, "A state of emergency was declared in Singapore on 1 December [1941], but the British were still woefully ill prepared. The colonial authorities feared that an overreaction might unsettle the native population. The appalling complacency of colonial society had produced a self-deception largely based on arrogance. A fatal underestimation of their attackers included the idea that all Japanese soldiers were very short-sighted, and inherently inferior to western troops". (8)

In reality the typical Japanese infantryman was tough, resourceful, brave and sometimes capable of terrible brutality, as the Chinese among others could attest to. In the main, this was because the Japanese Army had been artificially indoctrinated with the extreme samurai traditions of the ancient warrior tribe. (9)

Conventional British thinking held that central Malaya, with its hundreds of miles of thick jungle and rubber plantations, would protect Singapore from attack by land. Unlike the British, Japan's soldiers proved to be masters of jungle warfare, adapting to the environment by camouflaging themselves, making excellent use of bicycles, and living off what the undergrowth had to offer.

That the Japanese had taken to the jungle like grouse to heather was a remarkable occurrence; their conquest of much of eastern China had not involved jungle fighting, and neither was Japan's mainland covered extensively with trees. (10)

Since late November 1941, the British in Hong Kong and Malaya had been expecting a Japanese invasion at any moment. The British presence in Hong Kong further north was, at this point, a century in existence, and of the territory's modern history Chomsky stated, "Hong Kong, of course, had a fair degree of independence, but we should bear in mind that that's recent. Hong Kong was stolen from China by British savagery, as part of their effort to destroy China in their huge narco-trafficking operations. The West may like to forget that, but I'm sure the Chinese don't". (11)

British Malaya was a mineral rich area, with its tin mines and sprawling rubber estates. These natural deposits were essential to a war economy, and coveted by a resource poor nation such as Japan. The British colonial administrator, Shenton Thomas, described Malaya as "the dollar arsenal of the Empire" (12). From their bases in French Indochina, during the early hours of 8 December 1941 Japan's units audaciously landed on the northern tip of Malaya, at the coastal city of Kota Bharu, and also at the Kra Isthmus in southern Thailand.

Having overall command of Japanese operations in Malaya was Lieutenant-General Tomoyuki Yamashita, the new commander of the Japanese 25th Army. He was personally known to the Axis dictators; in December 1940, the 55-year-old Yamashita had undertaken a clandestine military mission to Europe, where he visited Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini (13). Yamashita was one of the greatest commanders in the history of the Japanese Army. In Malaya, the British and their allies easily outnumbered Yamashita's troops; but the latter's fearless generalship would prove pivotal in the weeks ahead.

Military author Mark E. Stille, a retired US Navy commander, acknowledged that, "Both at an operational and tactical level, the Japanese were continually able to gain surprise. Their 'driving strategy' kept the British off balance and kept the initiative in Japanese hands. It worked primarily because the British thought it impossible even to attempt. Under the bold leadership of Yamashita, it was a formula for victory". (14)

The Japanese militarists estimated Malaya to hold almost as much importance as the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia) (15). The Dutch East Indies was the world's 7th largest oil producing country in 1930, and by 1940 it had risen to become the planet's 5th biggest oil producer, behind America, the USSR, Venezuela and Persia (Iran).

Both the British and Japanese believed Malaya and Singapore as strategically inseparable. British troops would not be able to hold Singapore, should Malaya be overrun by Yamashita's divisions. As news reached Britain's commanders, of the amphibious Japanese landings at Kota Bharu in northern Malaya, Japan's bomber aircraft conducted their first raids over Singapore at 4:30 am on 8 December 1941. Singapore was lit up like a Christmas tree with its city lights on, an easy target for the Japanese pilots who enjoyed air superiority over Malaya.

On 10 December 1941, Tokyo's bombers dealt a grievous blow to the British Navy, when they destroyed two of its landmark battleships off the east coast of Malaya, the 'HMS Prince of Wales' and 'HMS Repulse'. The loss of these two vessels signalled the end of British sea power in the Far East (16). News of their sinking, which also resulted in 840 sailor deaths, was met with dismay in England.

The British position in Malaya became critical from the beginning of the enemy's arrival. With the Japanese having secured their bridgehead at Kota Bharu, 125 miles to the west in the northern Malayan town of Jitra occurred "one of the British Army's most unlikely and

complete defeats during the entire war”, Stille wrote (17). A single Japanese battalion, supported by a company of tanks, defeated an entire division of British-led Indian troops in prepared positions in just over a day, by 13 December 1941.

The next serious engagement took place on 30 December 1941 around the town of Kampar, in western Malaya, just over 140 miles south of Jitra. Though the British artillery repulsed several Japanese assaults and inflicted numerous fatalities, Japan’s reinforcements compelled the British to begin withdrawing from Kampar on the night of 2 January 1942. (18)

Among the worst disasters of the Malayan campaign for Britain’s forces (and their allies) occurred along the Slim River, around 40 miles south of Kampar. At 3:30 am on 7 January 1942, 30 Japanese tanks rolled forward with reckless abandon, and went on a 6 hour turkey shoot against the British-trained 11th Indian Division. The British and Indian troops were well armed with anti-tank weapons, artillery and mines, but they were poorly deployed and caught by surprise. By 9:30 am on 7 January, some 3,000 British and Indian soldiers were taken prisoner and hundreds killed. (19)

The Malayan capital city, Kuala Lumpur, situated about 50 miles south of the Slim River in central Malaya, lay ripe for the taking. Four days later, Kuala Lumpur fell unopposed to the advancing Japanese on the evening of 11 January 1942. It was still over a week before Churchill would discover that Singapore, located 200 miles to the south-east of Kuala Lumpur, had no field defences facing landward.

While the British colonialists thought little of the Japanese, this was not often the case with frontline troops. Major Walter Boller, a British officer in the Royal Army Ordnance Corps (RAOC), said of the Japanese soldier almost 30 years after the war, “He hadn’t the mentality I suppose to think for himself. He just obeyed orders, and he came at you with everything he had, even if it meant losing his life. He didn’t care about life”. (20)

Gilbert Collins, a gunner in the British 14th Army, insisted that “The Japanese was a good soldier. He was a good soldier. When he was told to do a job, he would stop there until he died”. (21)

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Chapter XXIV

The Japanese March Through Southern Malaya and Singapore’s Outskirts

After the successful Japanese amphibious landings at Kota Bharu, northern British Malaya on 8 December 1941, in the 5 weeks that elapsed Tokyo’s forces had advanced more than 200 miles to capture the Malayan capital city, Kuala Lumpur, on 11 January 1942. This was a remarkable achievement by the Japanese 25th Army, led by the 56-year-old General Tomoyuki Yamashita, who would earn the nickname “The Tiger of Malaya”.

Mark E. Stille, a former United States Navy commander, wrote that “Of all the armies fielded by Japan during the war, the 25th Army was the best led and equipped” (1). On the ground, the distance that Yamashita’s divisions had covered to capture Kuala Lumpur was much greater than 200 miles. They had to take arduous, roundabout routes in the face of substantially larger enemy forces, advancing through the Malayan jungle and along the coastline, before they entered Kuala Lumpur unopposed in central Malaya.

The island of Singapore, another 200 miles to the south-east of Kuala Lumpur, was now very vulnerable. Were Singapore to be taken by the Japanese it would constitute “the worst disaster” in British history, Winston Churchill wrote (2). This calamity for the British did unfold, on 15 February 1942, which will be the subject of the next article.

Almost immediately, the Japanese had gained command of the air over British Malaya (comprising today mostly of Malaysia), and they also dominated the surrounding seas. On 10 December 1941, Japanese aircraft had sunk the famous British warships the ‘Prince of Wales’ and ‘Repulse’, off the east coast of Malaya. News of the battleships’ destruction came as a real blow to prime minister Churchill in London.

English military historian Antony Beevor wrote,

“Churchill, who had exulted in the great ships of the Royal Navy from his times as First Lord of the Admiralty, was stunned by the disaster. The tragedy felt even more personal to him, after his voyage in the *Prince of Wales* to Newfoundland in August [1941]. The Imperial Japanese Navy was now unchallenged in the Pacific. Hitler rejoiced at the news. It augured well for his declaration of war on the United States, announced on 11 December”. (3)

One indirect result of the early Japanese victories in south-east Asia, was that it had boosted the spirit of the Germans, at a time when their invasion of the Soviet Union was hitting the rocks. Japanese morale itself was very high, and a central factor in their advance through Malaya and elsewhere. The prominent British commander John Dill, in a memorandum to Churchill, had outlined that Singapore held more importance to Britain than the oil rich Middle East; because Singapore was “the most important strategic point in the British Empire” and “a stepping stone to Australia”. (4) (5)

In the final days of 1941 the British had already lost a prized possession, Hong Kong in south-eastern China, which was captured in a rapid Japanese assault. At this time, Japan’s forces were advancing through other Asian states namely British Borneo, the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia) and the Philippines.

Like with the Japanese, the British had no rightful claim to territories such as Hong Kong. American intellectual and analyst Noam Chomsky said, “Hong Kong was stolen from China by British savagery, as part of their effort to destroy China in their huge narco-trafficking operations”. (6)

Regarding some of Britain’s other conquests Chomsky wrote,

“In extenuation, it could be noted that fostering drug production is hardly a US innovation: the British empire relied crucially on the most extraordinary narco-trafficking enterprise in world history, with horrifying effects in China and in India, much of which was conquered in an effort to gain a monopoly on opium production”. (7)

On 7 January 1942 the British General and Commander-in-Chief of India, Archibald Wavell, arrived in Malaya. He promptly attributed the Japanese successes, to date, as being due to errors committed by the British, refusing to give Yamashita's men credit (8). Yet on the very day that General Wavell had landed in Malaya, along the Slim River the British-led divisions had suffered "The single most disastrous engagement of the entire Malaya campaign", Stille stated (9); which he also described as "one of the most dramatic and significant actions of the entire Pacific War". (10)

Stille is referring to the Battle of Slim River on 7 January 1942, which took place about 50 miles north of Kuala Lumpur. Thirty Japanese tanks supported by motorised infantry "rumbled down a single road machine-gunning and shooting up everything in their path", inflicting 500 fatalities and capturing more than 3,000 British and Indian troops. By contrast the Japanese recorded fewer than 80 casualties during this battle.

The consequences were severe. Stille observed,

"It ensured the loss of central Malaya, and reduced the chances of holding southern Malaya long enough to enable the reinforcements flowing into Singapore to become fully effective". (11)

Not resting on their gains the Japanese resumed their march southward, and 4 days later Kuala Lumpur was taken. In the capital, Japan's soldiers found large quantities of ammunition and supplies, left behind by the British (12). These reverses compelled Lieutenant-General Arthur Percival - in overall command of British and Commonwealth divisions in Malaya - to order a withdrawal to southern Malaya, towards the Muar District and Johore.



Lt. Gen. Tomoyuki Yamashita (seated, center) insists upon the unconditional surrender of Singapore as Lt. Gen. Percival, seated between his officers, demurs (photo from Imperial War Museum) (Licensed under Public Domain)

Allied to the British, the Australian forces laid a devilish trap at Gemencheh, around 150 miles north-west of Singapore. Soldiers from the Japanese 5th Division were in the process of crossing Gemencheh Bridge, at 4 pm on 14 January 1942. They were unaware that the Australians had mined the bridge with explosives. As the Japanese tanks, trucks and cyclists

were traversing the bridge, a huge detonation erupted sending bodies, bicycles and armour hurtling into the air, a surreal and terrible sight.

Australian sources claimed to have inflicted 1,000 casualties on the enemy here; but the tally may have been as few as 70 deaths and 57 wounded, initially at least as the fighting continued (13). The Japanese quickly recovered from the shock at Gemenchah Bridge, and in following hours forced the Australians on to the backfoot. By nightfall on 16 January, the Japanese had captured Muar town and the harbour.

As early as 18 January 1942, Lieutenant-General Percival was mulling over whether to pull out of southern Malaya, and to relocate all of his forces to Singapore slightly further south, in order to bolster that island's defence. On 20 January, General Wavell instructed Percival to defend the southern Malayan region of Johore for as long as possible.

Also on 20 January, an angry Churchill issued an order demanding,

"I want to make it absolutely clear that I expect every inch of ground to be defended, every scrap of material or defences to be blown to pieces to prevent capture by the enemy, and no question of surrender to be entertained until protracted fighting among the ruins of Singapore city". (14)

By 24 January, Percival had no choice but to compose an outline plan for a total withdrawal from the Malayan mainland, across the narrow Strait of Johore to Singapore (15). Churchill later expressed some sympathy for his beleaguered commander, writing that a "terrible load" had fallen "upon the shoulders of General Percival" (16). Between the 24th and 31st of January, the Australian troops retreated southward through Johore under Japanese pressure. The 11th Indian Infantry Division withdrew along the Malayan coastline, and was pursued by the Japanese Imperial Guards Division.

By the end of January 1942, some Indian and Australian units successfully reached Singapore, either by bridge or vessel across the Strait of Johore. The only road and rail lines, connecting Malaya to Singapore, was the Causeway at Johore Bahru, a kilometre long, 70 foot wide bridge. At 8:15 am on 31 January, the last British troops were safely over the Causeway and had entered Singapore. The Causeway was then destroyed with depth charges to prevent the Japanese from using it.

Seldom lacking in pride even in the most desperate circumstances, the British had conducted their retirement to Singapore in an orderly fashion. A Japanese lieutenant, Teruo Okada, when asked after the war what he thought of Britain's forces, had said, "We thought the British officer was a very good fighter, although the ones we captured they always said to me 'We will win the war, you see'. This I couldn't understand because here is a man who has surrendered, and he still said 'We will win the war'." (17)

There was, amazingly enough, no hint of panic from the British soldiers, and no congestion of armour or infantry over the Causeway to Singapore, a commendable action personally overseen by Percival, who has been much criticised.

Stille wrote that this "was certainly Percival's best-conducted operation of the campaign, and thwarted Yamashita's plans to destroy British forces before they could reach Singapore" (18). Yamashita was furious to learn that the Japanese aircraft, for some baffling reason which has never been properly explained, had failed to bomb the Causeway at Johore Bahru

- which the British and their allies were pouring across, the most ideal target for enemy planes.

Otherwise, Yamashita should have been exuberant with how the fighting had proceeded. In less than 8 weeks, the Japanese had reached the Strait of Johore on 31 January 1942, a lot sooner than they had expected (19). The battle for the Malayan mainland was now over and the battle for Singapore was imminent. From the second half of January 1942, Singapore had been the primary target of Japanese air raids, which occurred each day and were launched against the British naval base in Singapore, along with the nearby airfields and port. The Japanese air superiority contributed to a sense of futility in defending Singapore for long.

The population of Singapore according to one source was 1,370,300 in 1939 (20); but a detailed study shows that the island's population in 1931 was 557,745, when the last census was compiled (21). About 75% of those living in Singapore by the 1930s were ethnic Chinese, with the remaining percentage consisting largely of Malays (11.7%) and ethnic Indians (9.1%). (22)

Singapore's majority Chinese population presumably viewed with alarm the Japanese approach - as they should have, considering how Japan's soldiers had conquered much of eastern China and sometimes committed dreadful atrocities. Of the approximately 70,000 combat soldiers and 15,000 service troops defending Singapore, only 13 of the 38 battalions in all were British, 17 were actually Indian battalions, and the remainder mostly Australians.

Just one of the 17 Indian battalions was at full strength. They had taken a pounding in the earlier fighting for Malaya. The British-led forces, despite suffering heavy personnel losses on the Malayan peninsula, still outnumbered the Japanese by at least 2-to-1, but the defenders for the most part were poorly trained and under-equipped. (23)

Singapore was a fortress in name only. There were no field defences or fortifications on the northern part of the island. Percival was determined to fight the Japanese on the beaches, and to prevent them from establishing a bridgehead. His plan had little chance of succeeding, due to the terrain's unsuitability and the lack of depth in defence (24). What's more, none of the officers subordinate to Percival had confidence in his strategy for defending Singapore, particularly the Australians, who were to endure most of the serious fighting.

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Chapter XXV

The Japanese Capture of Singapore.

The “Largest Capitulation in British History”

The Japanese conquest of Singapore in south-east Asia, on 15 February 1942, is often referred to in Western historical annals as “the Fall of Singapore”, as though a free and unmolested territory had, for the first time, been captured by an imperial power.

In reality, the Japanese takeover of Singapore heralded an exchange from one set of colonial masters (the British Empire) to another (the Empire of Japan). Singapore had long constituted a colony, having been occupied by the British in the early 19th century.

The failure of Britain and its allies, to hold Singapore, was a severe blow to London’s prestige and power in the Far East. Writing in his memoirs Winston Churchill labelled it “the worst disaster and largest capitulation in British history”. As Britain’s prime minister and war leader, Churchill was ultimately responsible for military losses.

Yet at the time Churchill tried to absolve his government of blame, saying that the Singapore defeat was due to Britain having to allocate war resources to Soviet Russia, as part of conditions stipulated in US president Franklin Roosevelt’s Lend-Lease Act of March 1941. Scarcely any British or American matériel had been sent to the Soviet Union by early 1942 – when the crucial fighting in the Nazi-Soviet War had already taken place.

The Anglo-American powers, by December 1941, had dispatched half a million dollars worth of military aid to the Russians, which came to “1 per cent of the amount promised” by London and Washington, historian Chris Bellamy noted. In all, British deliveries of commodities to Moscow amounted to £45.6 million, a tiny fraction of what the Russians themselves spent on military production during World War II.

Of the situation in south-east Asia, Bellamy wrote,

“As early as the beginning of 1942, British politicians used the resources diverted to Russia as an excuse for losing Singapore... Churchill and [Anthony] Eden both said they had given to Russia what they had really needed for the defence of the Malay peninsula. This was untrue. British and Australian ground forces had been poorly trained and equipped for jungle warfare, and were simply outmatched and outfought by aggressive Japanese troops, enjoying superior morale”.

The Japanese 25th Army, tasked with capturing British Malaya and the island of Singapore, comprised of about 30,000 men. The 25th Army was led by one of the most formidable commanders of the entire war, Lieutenant-General Tomoyuki Yamashita; and the force that he commanded was “the best led and equipped army” that Japan had at its disposal, Mark E. Stille stated, a retired US Navy commander. Advancing through difficult terrain including extensive jungle, the 25th Army had captured all of the Malayan mainland against bigger enemy forces in less than 8 weeks, by 31 January 1942.

On that day, 31 January, the last British troops had retreated across the narrow Strait of Johore, traversing the bridge called the Causeway at Johore Bahru, which separated Malaya

from Singapore; where Britain's allies, the Indians and Australians, had now retired to, or at least those who survived the fighting on the Malayan mainland. The British Commonwealth forces still amounted to 85,000 men to defend Singapore, though they were lacking in equipment and training while their morale was not good.

From his position astride the Strait of Johore, Lieutenant-General Yamashita was looking through his binoculars at Singapore and its coastline. He again demonstrated his excellent military brain, by correctly assessing that the most heavily defended part of Singapore was in the north-eastern section of the Strait. Yamashita's opposite number, Lieutenant-General Arthur Percival, had positioned his strongest force there, the British 18th Division.

Yamashita chose instead to attack a weakly-defended portion of the Strait, held by the 22nd Australian Infantry Brigade, between Tanjong Buloh and Tanjong Murai. The Japanese commander decided to amass 16 of his battalions, to be launched in the first wave across an area of land 4.5 miles in breadth, with 5 battalions held back in reserve along with a tank regiment. Yamashita scheduled the assault on Singapore to begin at 8 pm on 8 February 1942.

To mount his attack across the Strait of Johore to Singapore, Yamashita could call upon many scores of collapsible boats, 30 small landing craft, along with numerous pontoons, the latter consisting of floating platforms used to support temporary bridges. Yamashita went to great lengths to disguise where his main thrust would fall. Churchill acknowledged that the Japanese had undertaken "long and careful planning" for their raid on Singapore. The Japanese Imperial Guards built dummy camps in the north-eastern sector, so as to make the British believe they were preparing to attack in that area.

Percival, in overall command of British and Commonwealth forces, was confident that the weight of the Japanese landing would indeed come there, in the north-east. Pre-attack Japanese artillery raids were also concentrated in the north-east, strengthening Percival's impression that he would be proved right. The Japanese assault troops were not moved forward until the night prior to the landing. About 24 hours before the attack on Singapore had commenced, the Australians detected extensive enemy activity opposite them, but it was too late for Percival to reconstitute his forces.

Churchill wrote, "The preparation of field defences and obstacles, though representing a good deal of local effort, bore no relation to the mortal needs which now arose... The spirit of the Army had been largely reduced by the long retreat and hard fighting on the peninsula. The threatened northern and western shores were protected by the Johore Strait, varying in width from 600 to 2,000 yards, and to some extent by mangrove swamps at the mouths of its several rivers".

This is what the Japanese faced in front of them. On the morning of 8 February 1942, Japanese planes and artillery started bombarding the positions held by the 22nd Australian Infantry Brigade. The barrage intensified as the day went on, and at around 8:30 pm on 8 February, after nightfall, the Australians sighted Japanese landing craft nearing their area. Regardless of having no artillery support, the Aussies resisted strongly and sank some Japanese vessels but, even so, the enemy soon broke through their thinly spread rearguard.

By 4 am on 9 February, the Australian forces had all been ordered to fall back, a difficult task in the dark, and they suffered debilitating losses. The Japanese had established a toehold on Singapore and they could not be dislodged.

Percival's command centre was unable to implement operations in Singapore at any level. On 9 February Percival himself admitted that the "situation is undoubtedly serious". Yamashita sensed the British confusion, and he ordered a full-blooded drive to take Singapore as quickly as possible. Within 2 days, the Japanese had captured 33% of Singapore's territory. On just the 3rd day of the offensive, during the evening of 10 February the enemy had penetrated British defences, such as the critically important Jurong Line, before Percival had realised the attempt had been made. Stille recognised, "The loss of this line was the last chance to defend Singapore city".

British-led counterattacks could either not be executed in time, or were poorly organised. On 10 February Churchill wrote of the position at Singapore, "There must at this stage be no thought of saving the troops or sparing the population. The battle must be fought to the bitter end at all costs... The honour of the British Empire and of the British Army is at stake... With the Russians fighting as they are and the Americans so stubborn at Luzon [northern Philippines], the whole reputation of our country and our race is involved". This would all prove in vain.

At 6 pm on 11 February, day 4 of the Japanese offensive, the landmark British naval base in Singapore had been abandoned, and explosives were deployed, but the base was merely partially destroyed. Yamashita's soldiers did not let up on 12 February, as they continued moving down the strategically vital Bukit Timah road towards Singapore city.

Beginning at around noon on 12 February, the British and their allies started withdrawing to a final perimeter around Singapore city. By the morning of 13 February, the defenders held a perimeter stretching 28 miles around Singapore. Their forces were depleted. The British Governor in Singapore, Shenton Thomas, gave orders that the broadcasting station be blown up, and the contents of the treasury burned. The supplies of rubber in Singapore were incinerated, while the tin-smelting plants and a number of other factories were liquidated. At some plants, the attempt to demolish them was prevented by its owners and staff. Other facilities were deemed necessary for the island's inhabitants.

Some troops at the rear fled their positions from the approaching Japanese, and there were reports of armed deserters looting. A few seized small vessels to escape from Singapore, and others tried to board ships exiting the port area. During the early afternoon of 13 February, Percival held a conference with his principal staff and officers. Those present concurred that a counterattack had no hope of succeeding and the situation was desperate. Later that day, Percival confessed that resistance would probably last for another 24 or 48 hours.

On the night of 13 February, the last ships and other craft were ordered to leave the Singapore coastline, and set sail for the Indonesian islands of Java and Sumatra with 3,000 evacuees on board. Through 14 February, the Japanese pressure on the western part of the Singapore perimeter increased. Late on the 14th, the Japanese 18th Division had advanced to less than 3 kilometres from the southern edge of Singapore city.

In the centre, attacks by the Japanese 5th Division, supported by tanks, made further progress down the Bukit Timah road in central Singapore. They descended on a residential area at the fringes of Singapore city. Compounding Percival's woes, on the morning of 14 February he had been told, by the Director General of Civil Defence, that the city's water supplies would be cut off at any moment, with the island's reservoirs in Japanese hands.

By now, the Japanese artillery and air attacks were raining down at will on the city, leading to widespread civilian casualties and suffering. During a staff meeting that began at 9:30 am on 15 February, Percival was forced to confront the inevitable. There were chronic shortages of fuel and heavy ammunition. At 5:15 pm on 15 February, Percival and his Chief-of-Staff obeyed Japanese instructions to go to the Ford Factory at Bukit Timah, in order to discuss surrender terms with the Japanese officers.

Once the opposing sides had convened at the Ford Factory, Yamashita, as he was entitled to do, repeatedly demanded unconditional surrender from the reluctant Percival, under threat of renewed Japanese attacks. With Yamashita becoming increasingly impatient, Percival at last consented after a 55 minute meeting. The unconditional surrender was signed at 6:10 pm on 15 February 1942, and became effective at 8:30 pm.

Stille wrote, "The 70-day campaign for Malaya and Singapore was over, and the greatest military defeat in British history complete". Throughout the 10 week fight, the British-led forces suffered 138,708 losses, of which more than 130,000 were prisoners taken by the Japanese, about 80,000 of them in Singapore.

It is seldom mentioned that it was the Indian troops, and not the British, who bore the brunt of fighting. From the total casualties, 67,340 were Indian, 38,496 were British, 18,490 were Australian and the local units suffered 14,382 killed, captured or wounded. Japanese casualties amounted to 9,824, that is just 7% of British Commonwealth losses. Taking into account that the Malayan campaign involved British-led divisions, on paper it entailed the largest surrender of forces in the field in British history; but in the wider context of the world war, especially when compared to casualties at that time in the western Soviet Union, the above losses were inconsequential.

The strategic repercussions for Britain were much more serious than their casualties. The Japanese taking of Malaya and Singapore meant the British Empire was rapidly disintegrating. Japan's victory on the Malayan peninsula foreshadowed their capture of Burma (Myanmar) and the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia) in the spring of 1942. The deep natural resources of Malaya, notably its tin and rubber, were now under Tokyo's command; which the Japanese leadership calculated to be almost as significant as the petroleum rich Dutch East Indies, the world's 5th big oil producer in 1940.

The above conquests enabled Japan, an otherwise resource poor country, to prosecute a vast war for nearly another 4 years. How could such a disaster have befallen the British in Malaya? Among the most important factors, as Bellamy alluded to earlier, was that the Japanese infantry were better trained, more determined and utilised superior tactics in comparison to the British and Commonwealth forces. The Japanese Army was not famed for its prowess with tanks and armour but, under Yamashita's leadership, the 25th Army made ample use of such vehicles on the Malayan peninsula.

By evening on the first day (8 December 1941) of the Japanese landings, northern Malaya had been lost to the enemy almost without a fight. On 10 December, the Japanese further wrested control of the nearby seas having on that day destroyed prominent British warships. Also at this time they were winning command of the skies. Stille observed, "The weak British air force was crippled on the first few days, and never became a factor in the campaign. The Japanese enjoyed air superiority, and all the advantages that this confers, for virtually the entire campaign".

The British-led units were poorly deployed in Malaya, as they were dispersed over too wide an area, and could not concentrate their forces to repel the Japanese advance. The fighting for central Malaya in early January 1942 was pivotal. A successful stand by the defenders there could have enabled them to launch a counteroffensive against the Japanese, which may have knocked the latter off balance and at least delayed their march.

Once central Malaya and the capital city Kuala Lumpur were lost, it was inevitable that the southern portion of the peninsula would thereafter capitulate, along with Singapore. No further British reinforcements could be sent to Singapore, nor was the island prepared for an attack from the north.

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Chapter XXVI

The US Firestorming of Tokyo Rivalled the Hiroshima Bombing

In the early hours of 10 March 1945, as America's heavy aircraft dropped over 1,600 tons of bombs on Tokyo, a firestorm larger and hotter than ever before was brewing. During the firebombings of Dresden and Hamburg, temperatures reached 1,500 degrees Fahrenheit, but in Tokyo it soared to a blinding 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit.

Such was the heat unleashed by US bombers over the Japanese capital, that civilians in their air raid shelters were beginning to suffocate. Rather than be overwhelmed, they fled into

the streets, becoming glued to the melting asphalt under their feet. Those now stuck in the roads or pavements were helpless, many of whom were heavily charred by the rapidly growing fires.

Like Venice, the famous northern Italy city, Tokyo is dissected with canals. The people who avoided being rooted to the asphalt in the open, jumped into the many canals, among them numerous women and children. Due to the unprecedented temperatures the canals, particularly the smaller ones, started to boil, cooking to the death further thousands of civilians.

About 280 American B-29 Superfortresses – four-engine heavy bombers – had ignited this unparalleled firestorm. Exiting the scene of destruction, many of the aircraft crews had to quickly attach their oxygen masks; it prevented them from vomiting or passing out, such was the stench of death emanating from about five thousand feet below.



“Tokyo burns under B-29 firebomb assault.” May 26, 1945. (Source: US Army Air Forces / Wikimedia Commons)

US Major General Curtis LeMay had ordered the firebombing of Tokyo, with maximum casualties in mind, living up to his nickname “Bombs away LeMay”. In a June 1981 interview with the American historian Michael Sherry, LeMay said:

“There are no innocent civilians. It is their government and you are fighting a people,

you are not trying to fight an armed force anymore. So it doesn't bother me so much to be killing the innocent bystanders".

In 1945 Roger Fisher, a First Lieutenant and future Harvard Law professor, was LeMay's "weather officer" on the island of Guam, in the western Pacific Ocean. Just before the Tokyo firebombing, Fisher revealed that LeMay "asked me a question I'd never heard before". What LeMay wanted to know was, "How strong are the winds going to be at ground level?" Fisher could not know, informing LeMay that winds can only be predicted (in 1945) "at high altitudes, with reconnaissance flights" and "at intermediate altitudes if we dropped balloons". LeMay then asked

"How strong does the wind have to be so that people can't get away from the flames? Will the wind be strong enough for that?"

Fisher stammered and was unable to answer, quickly retiring to his quarters, and saying of LeMay that,

"I didn't go near him again that night. I had my deputy deal with him. It was the first time it had entered my head that the purpose of our operation was to kill as many people as possible".

The ground conditions were, as it turned out, exactly to LeMay's liking, with prevailing winds of up to 28 mph (45 km/h). The blustery weather was akin to a bellows fanning the fires, further aided by the dry atmosphere and Tokyo's extensive wood-and-paper buildings.

Officially, around 100,000 civilians were said to have died as a result of the bombing raids, which lasted a mere couple of hours. However, noted historians such as Gabriel Kolko, an American-born Canadian academic, estimates the Tokyo body count at 125,000 – which rivals the final death toll from the Hiroshima bombing.

The Tokyo firestorming, code-named "Operation Meetinghouse", was the single deadliest air raid of World War II by quite some distance. In addition, around one million of Tokyo's residents suffered injury during the attack, while one million were also left homeless. Over 250,000 of the city's buildings were destroyed, a quarter of all structures in Tokyo at the time, one of the world's largest cities. Indeed, the size of the area destroyed (almost 16 square miles) was larger than the destruction wrought by both the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings.

Many of the American aircraft that inflicted the devastation, upon return to their base in the Mariana Islands, were found to be streaked with ashes from Tokyo's buildings. The Japanese anti-aircraft defenses proved especially inadequate, shooting down only 14 American planes. LeMay was satisfied with the results. After the war he acknowledged that,

"Killing Japanese didn't bother me very much at that time... I suppose if I had lost the war, I would have been tried as a war criminal... Every soldier thinks something of the moral aspects of what he is doing. But all war is immoral and if you let that bother you, you're not a good soldier".

Had LeMay been on the German or Japanese side, there is a great probability he would have been tried as a war criminal – along with others, such as his British counterpart Arthur "Bomber" Harris. The brutal air assaults ordered by both LeMay and Harris made those of the Luftwaffe chief, Hermann Goering, appear puny by comparison. After conflict ends, it

seems only the defeated are held to account for their crimes. In the months following the war two military tribunals were held, the Nuremberg Trials and Tokyo Trials. There was no clamoring call for similar proceedings to be held in Washington or London.

On 1 September 1939, the day the Nazis invaded Poland, US president Franklin D. Roosevelt made [an appeal](#):

“The ruthless bombing from the air of civilians in unfortified centers of population... has sickened the hearts of civilized men and women and has profoundly shocked the conscience of humanity... under no circumstances undertake the bombardment from the air of civilian populations, or of unfortified cities”.

Roosevelt was referring to the Japanese bombing of Shanghai in 1937 – and also the German and Italian bombardment of the Basque and Catalan cities of Guernica, Barcelona and Granollers, during the Spanish Civil War.

Roosevelt’s words would prove hollow. Less than four years after his address, the American Eight Air Force combined with the Royal Air Force in firebombing Hamburg, Germany’s second largest city. The outright targeting of civilians over Hamburg, lasting just over a week in July 1943, killed over 40,000 people – slightly more than those that died during the Luftwaffe’s eight month blitz of Britain, ending in May 1941. Roosevelt was still in office when large sections of Tokyo were being burned to a cinder, along with great numbers of its civilians. On these occasions, there were no objectives put forth by Roosevelt regarding “the ruthless bombing from the air of civilians”.

Indeed, it was Roosevelt who was a key figure in the formulation of the atomic bomb. He oversaw its continuing development until his death on 12 April 1945, even after it had long become clear to the Allies that Hitler had no nuclear program. Roosevelt had previously said the [reason](#) to produce the atomic bomb “was to see that the Nazis don’t blow us up”. Yet, by 1944, this logic was no longer valid, as Roosevelt surely knew.

Hitler had shunned nuclear research for a variety of reasons, on both racial and pragmatic grounds, also foreseeing that these weapons “would force humanity down the road to extinction”. This earth-shattering concern was not expressed by Roosevelt, successor Harry Truman or Winston Churchill. As a result, the shadow of nuclear weapons hovers over humanity to this day.

Meanwhile, in February 1942, Churchill had himself green-lighted the first strategic bombing of urban centers in the war – with the real aim of killing and terrorizing Germany’s civilian population. A British Air Staff directive, dated February 14 1942, outlined that the air war “should now be focused on the morale of the enemy’s civil population”.

Also in February 1942, Britain had launched the famous Avro Lancaster heavy bomber, hundreds of which participated in the murderous firestorming of Hamburg the following year. Already, by 1940 and 1941, the RAF had introduced two other four-engine heavy bombers, the Handley Page Halifax and the Short Stirling – both of which were involved in the “first ever 1,000 bomber raid” over Cologne, in the early hours of 31 May 1942. Almost 1,500 tons of bombs were dropped on Cologne, a city of significant size in western Germany.

The Luftwaffe possessed not a single four-engine bomber aircraft. That is, planes capable of

flying extended distances, with large payloads of explosives, thereby inflicting significant damage. The Germans only had two-engine medium and short range bombers. Hitler was not a proponent of strategic bombing and targeting of urban populations en masse, nor had he prepared for it. He only switched focus after the RAF inflicted serious damage upon the medieval city of Lubeck, in late March 1942. Just over a fortnight later, 14 April, Hitler relayed an order declaring that the German air war “be given a more aggressive stamp”, focusing on areas “where attacks are likely to have the greatest possible effect on civilian life”. When it came to terror bombing of civilians, it was something of a British and American specialty.

The German Blitz itself – which began on 7 September 1940 – was Hitler’s direct [response](#) to a series of British attacks on Berlin over the previous fortnight. The German capital was bombed for the first time in the early hours of 25 August 1940, a sure sign of things to come. The bombings were a result of Churchill’s increasingly belligerent war strategy.

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