# THE BATTLE FOR MOSCOW

DAVID STAHEL

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In November 1941 Hitler ordered German forces to complete the final drive on the Soviet capital, then less than 100 km away. Army Group Centre was pressed into the attack for one last attempt to break Soviet resistance before the onset of winter. From the German perspective, the final drive on Moscow had all the ingredients of a dramatic final battle in the east, which, according to previous accounts, only failed at the gates of Moscow. David Stahel now challenges this well-established narrative by demonstrating that the last German offensive of 1941 was a forlorn effort, undermined by operational weakness, poor logistics, and driven forward by what he identifies as National Socialist military thinking. With unparalleled research from previously undocumented army files and soldiers' letters, Stahel takes a fresh look at the battle for Moscow, which, even before the Soviet winter offensive, threatened disaster for Germany's war in the east.

**David Stahel** is a lecturer at the University of New South Wales in Canberra. His previous publications include *Operation Barbarossa and Germany's Defeat in the East* (2009), *Kiev 1941* (2011), *Nazi Policy on the Eastern Front, 1941* (2012) and *Operation Typhoon* (2013).

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In *Foucault's Pendulum* Umberto Eco wrote: 'I believe that what we become depends on what our fathers teach us at odd moments, when they aren't trying to teach us. We are formed by little scraps of wisdom.' The day I was born I had an infant older brother and a mother who had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis during her pregnancy with me. In the months leading to my birth my mother had lost the use of her legs and eyes. Two years before my father had been a single young man with next to no responsibility and then, in 1975, he found himself with two infant sons and a severely disabled wife. Of course, growing up I hardly gave any of this much thought. My father just had a lot to do to take care of us all – and he never wavered in that commitment. Recalling those days and recounting the moments from which I might have gleaned little scraps of wisdom would probably fill a book in itself, but, since I am an historian and not a memoirist, this book will have to do. Happy dedication dad.

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# GLOSSARY

| | |
|---|---|
| BA-MA | Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv (German Military Archive) |
| *Das Reich* | 2nd SS Division |
| *Einsatzgruppen* | 'action groups' of the SD and Security Police, used mainly for mass killings |
| *Endsieg* | final victory |
| *Erhaltungsegedanken* | conservation of strength and preparation for winter |
| *Grossdeutschland* | 'Greater Germany' Infantry Regiment (later division) |
| *Grosstransportraum* | 'large transport area'. Referring to the transport regiment responsible for bridging the gap between front-line divisions and railheads |
| KTB | Kriegstagebuch (war diary) |
| *Landser* | German infantry man |
| *Lebensraum* | living space |
| *Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler* | SS Regiment (later division) |
| Luftwaffe | German Air Force |
| OKH | *Oberkommando des Heeres* (High Command of the Army) |
| OKW | *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (High Command of the Armed Forces) |
| *Ostheer* | Eastern Army |
| Pz. Div. | Panzer Division |

| | |
|---|---|
| *rasputitsa* | 'quagmire season'; refers to the biannual difficulties caused by heavy rains or melting snow in Russia, Belarus and Ukraine |
| *Reichsbahn* | German railways |
| SD | *Sicherheitsdienst* (Security Service) |
| *Sondermeldungen* | special news bulletins |
| SS | *Schutzstaffel* (Protection Echelon) |
| *Stavka* | Soviet High Command |
| *Vernichtungskrieg* | War of annihilation |
| Wehrmacht | German Armed Forces |
| *Wirkungsgedanken* | exploitation of all resources to achieve maximum effect |

# TABLES OF MILITARY RANKS AND ARMY STRUCTURES

*Table of equivalent ranks*

| German army/ Luftwaffe | Translation used in this study | Equivalent US army rank |
|---|---|---|
| Officer ranks | | |
| Generalfeldmarschall | Field Marshal | General of the Army |
| Generaloberst | Colonel-General | General |
| General | General | Lieutenant General |
| der Infanterie | of Infantry | |
| der Artillerie | of Artillery | |
| der Flakartillerie | of Flak Artillery | |
| der Flieger | of Aviation | |
| der Kavallerie | of Cavalry | |
| der Luftwaffe | of the Luftwaffe | |
| der Panzertruppe | of Panzer Troops | |
| der Pioniere | of Engineers | |
| Generalleutnant | Lieutenant-General | Major General |
| Generalmajor | Major-General | Brigadier General |
| Oberst | Colonel | Colonel |
| Oberstleutnant | Lieutenant-Colonel | Lieutenant Colonel |
| Major | Major | Major |
| Hauptmann | Captain | Captain |
| Oberleutnant | 1st Lieutenant | 1st Lieutenant |
| Leutnant | Lieutenant | 2nd Lieutenant |
| Enlisted ranks | | |
| Stabsfeldwebel | Master Sergeant | Master Sergeant |
| Oberfeldwebel | Technical Sergeant | Technical Sergeant |

*(cont.)*

| German army/ Luftwaffe | Translation used in this study | Equivalent US army rank |
|---|---|---|
| Feldwebel | Staff Sergeant | Staff Sergeant |
| Unterfeldwebel | Sergeant | Sergeant |
| Unteroffizier | Corporal | Corporal |
| Gefreiter | Private | Private 1st Class |
| Soldat | Private | Private 2nd Class |

*Source:* Karl-Heinz Frieser, *The Blitzkrieg Legend. The 1940 Campaign in the West* (Annapolis, 2005) p. 355.

*Structure and size of the German army*

| Germany army formation | English translation | Number of subordinate units | Average number of personnel[a] |
|---|---|---|---|
| Heeresgruppe | Army Group | Two or more armies | 100,000 to more than a million |
| Armee | Army | Two or more corps | 60,000–250,000 |
| Korps | Corps | Two or more divisions | 40,000–70,000 |
| Division | Division | Two or more brigades | 12,000–18,000 |
| Brigade | Brigade | Two or more regiments | 5,000–7,000 |
| Regiment | Regiment | Two or more battalions | 2,000–6,000 |
| Bataillon | Battalion | Two or more companies | 500–1,000 |
| Kompanie | Company | Two or more platoons | 100–200 |
| Zug | Platoon | | 30–40 |

*Note:* [a] Wide variations of these figures occurred, especially after 1941.
*Source:* Author's own records.

# INTRODUCTION

The battle of Moscow involved 2.5 million men on both sides of the eastern front, making it one of the largest and, without question, one of the most important battles of the Second World War. According to Andrew Roberts, Hitler's offensive towards the Soviet capital was nothing less than decisive: 'It is no exaggeration to state that the outcome of the Second World War hung in the balance during this massive attack'.[1] For both sides, the battle for Moscow was an epic of endurance and sacrifice, while its sheer magnitude concentrated the world's attention as never before.

There can be no debate that Nazi Germany's drive on Moscow was a human calamity with few precedents in history. The battle began at the start of October 1941 with Operation Typhoon and, with a two-week pause at the start of November, continued to the very gates of Moscow by early December 1941. As one German soldier wrote: 'Burning villages, the bodies of dead Russian soldiers, the carcasses of dead horses, burned-out tanks, and abandoned equipment were the signposts of our march.'[2] Magnifying this level of destruction across a front nearly 700 km wide, Army Group Centre, the German force charged with seizing the Soviet capital, left a torrent of devastation through central Russia.

The offensive towards Moscow was only the latest in an unbroken series of battles that Army Group Centre had fought since June 1941. The trail of destruction began with a two-week battle at Minsk, followed by a two-month battle at Smolensk, and then a month of fighting down into Ukraine for the battle of Kiev. Even before the battle of Moscow, the

number of dead, wounded and missing in the Nazi–Soviet war counted in the millions. It was warfare on a colossal scale, which was not lost on the participants of the time. Kurt Vogeler wrote home in December 1941 shortly before his own death:

> The world has seen many great, even grand wars. But there has probably never been a war in its history, which can measure up to the present in Eastern Europe. This is true both of its size, which stretches for many hundreds of kilometers of active front, the vast spaces that host battles with million-man armies of opposing nations, but also by the method and manner of the fighting itself.[3]

Truly comprehending warfare on this scale is especially difficult. Reviewing the wartime records of armies, corps and divisions, checking supply timetables and production graphs, reading the accounts of the leading generals all goes a long way towards capturing the overall picture of events, but it only paints, in the broadest of brush strokes, how the war was actually experienced by the men who fought it. Even first-hand accounts only tell us the stories of those who survived and had the opportunity to publish their experiences or otherwise commit them to a public record. There is no doubt there are some very valuable soldiers' memoirs (notwithstanding the problems post-war accounts present), as well as some outstanding publications of letters and diaries, but these are still relatively few in number given the millions of men that took part.

Visiting the battlefields on the approaches to Moscow one can hardly avoid the imposing number of Soviet memorials. These testify to the fact that however much we may have learned about this chapter of history there is far more that must be left unrecorded, which died with its participants. In that sense it is even more important not to lose sight of the human dimension of this battle, because it is apparent just how much has already been lost. Yet the old Soviet battlefields serve as much more than just sites for passive reflection about the past. These battlefields are very much active sites for historical inquiry, as well as dangerous work-sites for the discovery, identification and reburial of countless lost soldiers still listed as 'missing in action'.

In September 2012, I visited some of these battlefields together with government-approved 'searchers', Russian volunteers who work every summer looking for artefacts, clearing away ordinance and seeking to lay to rest as many remaining war dead as possible. At first glance, the

vast tracts of undisturbed forest appear like any other in northern Europe; only the odd mangled and rusted vehicle, often obscured by undergrowth and trees, are traces of the events that once took place here. For the most part, the forest appears like any other; its historical importance is deceptively inconspicuous. Yet once the metal detectors were turned on a vast battlefield was revealed to lie just below the surface of the forest floor. Literally every few steps yield new discoveries. Most of these objects are harmless – parts of weapons, gas masks, helmets, bayonets or shell fragments – but not infrequently unexploded grenades and other ordinance are dug up, making it easy to see why searchers die every year in Russia. Indeed, the fact that Hitler's war in the east is still today claiming Russian victims is one reason why the Nazi–Soviet war remains so very much a part of the contemporary Russian national identity.

For my part, the piles of artefacts coming out of the ground were a stark reminder of the scale of this battle, but it was all still somewhat detached from its human dimension. Only the occasional personal effect from an unknown man gave any sense of the human tragedy that the site also represented. The searchers told me that very few bodies are recovered, on average their team discovers just one or two each summer and even then it is extremely unlikely that the soldier will ever be formally identified. Soviet soldiers in 1941 did not carry 'dog tags',[4] but rather capsules in which their personal details were recorded on a small piece of rolled paper. Yet the seepage of moisture often ensured that the identity of the owner could never be determined even if the capsule was recovered. Another common problem was a wartime superstition among Soviet soldiers that stipulated a man would not be killed if he had not filled out the identification paper, meaning that countless capsules are recovered with blank papers or none at all.

After many hours in the forest we were preparing to leave with a load of artefacts destined for the local museum in Vaz'ma. We had already started the long walk back to our 4WDs when word came that a body had been found and was carefully being dug out of the ground, one bone at a time. We arrived to find the soldier's leg arranged on a dirty blanket next to his wartime grave. Over the next hour the rest of the skeleton, along with gas mask and personal effects were removed from the ground. His lower jaw still had its full set of teeth. The work proceeded in a heavy silence; a mixture of quiet disbelief and unspoken reverence at what we were all witnessing. Eventually, even his capsule

**Figure I.1** The excavated equipment from Sergei's gravesite in a forest near Vaz'ma (September 2012)

was recovered, and that night in a controlled room (to protect whatever remained of its contents) the capsule was opened for the first time since 1941. There was a paper, it was still intact and the name legible. Without the family's permission I shall not record the full details here, other than to say the man's first name was Sergei. His younger sister was still alive, and within days was informed that her brother's body had been found seventy-one years after he went missing. A month later, Sergei was reburied with his family present and full military honours.[5] His fate

reminds us that behind the faceless enormity of the battle for Moscow there are countless family tragedies as well as innumerable untold stories.

Indeed, the battle of Moscow itself, while hardly an untold story, often lacks an appropriate strategic context. The picture commonly portrayed centres overwhelmingly on the proximity of German forces to Moscow, and the close-run race between German offensive strength and Soviet defensive power. The fact that German forces reached the outermost parts of the city is often accepted as evidence for just how close the city came to capture. Indeed, many in the postwar generation remained firmly convinced that if only Army Group Centre could have pressed on a few more kilometres and seized Moscow, Germany's 1941 campaign in the east would have been capped by a resounding success. At the same time, failure at Moscow granted the Red Army its first real victory of the war, allowing a glimmer of hope for the Soviet people and shattering the German army's myth of invincibility. In these accounts the battle for Moscow assumes tremendous importance as an all or nothing, knife-edge encounter worthy of all the drama and suspense histories have hitherto attributed to it. Edgar Snow, a well-known American author and journalist of the period, helped to establish the myth of a close-run battle when he wrote that Moscow's defenders 'went to certain death, but the few hours they held the panzers back enabled the Siberian troops to reach the city and win the critical battle'.[6] Such a thrilling account flowed seamlessly into the postwar narratives as one of Nazi Germany's great 'lost opportunities' of the Second World War.[7]

More contemporary accounts have not always disagreed. In his first-rate history of Hitler's and Stalin's dictatorships, the eminent Second World War scholar Richard Overy presents the Soviet line at Moscow as being 'held by the finest of margins'.[8] Indeed, it is only with the launch of the Soviet winter offensive on 5 December that Overy sees the character of the war changing and a shift away from Blitzkrieg 'finally creating the conditions for a long war of attrition and averting a rapid German victory'.[9] I have previously argued that this shift occurred much earlier in the Nazi–Soviet war and that a campaign running into the autumn of 1941 had long since precluded a rapid German victory, yet it is how we understand the battle of Moscow that most concerns this study. Part of the problem is that Overy's characterisation of events, as with other contemporary acounts, is not incorrect – there was indeed a bitter struggle, desperately fought on the roads leading to Moscow. Yet that is only one aspect of the battle.

The strategic context in which the battle of Moscow was fought casts the events at the front in a different light, and shows the Soviet Union far from defeat in November and December 1941. Indeed, Moscow's fall was never seriously in question. It was Army Group Centre that was tempting fate by continuing with an offensive that had already ground itself to a halt at the end of October, and was now expending the last of its desperately short reserves of men and supplies just to reach the Soviet capital (to say nothing of conquering the city). The weather and conditions precluded a repeat of the rapid warfare that had typified Army Group Centre's earlier successes and, consequently, the November fighting took the form of frontal assaults with the panzer forces acting largely as battering rams. One German officer explained the transformation of operations in 1941: 'We gradually lost the ability to manoeuvre. War became one of linear movement. We did not bother about creating a "*Schwerpunkt*" [a concentration of forces]. We were no longer instructed to surprise, outflank and annihilate the enemy. We were told: "You will hold the front from such a point to such and such a point, you will advance to such a line".'[10] The success of these German operations may have brought them to the very outskirts of the Soviet capital, but only at the cost of seriously depleting, and utterly exhausting, their forces. What is more, the German offensive never came close to encircling Moscow (as German plans stipulated), nor did they have the strength to launch even a single assault against the city (which Hitler had in any case prohibited).[11]

Determining the course of the battle is as much about understanding German weakness as it is about appreciating Soviet strength. An essential element of the battle for Moscow was the careful build-up of Soviet reserves throughout the November fighting. No less than five Soviet reserve armies were withheld from the Moscow front as the Germans fought their way towards the city and Marshal Georgi Zhukov, commanding the Soviet Western Front, emphatically told Stalin in mid-November: 'We will, without fail, hold Moscow.'[12] Zhukov's confidence was not mere bravado. There was a conscious Soviet decision to absorb the German offensive, committing as few of their reserves to this task as possible before assuming a more offensive posture. Had the German offensive enjoyed greater success more Soviet reserves would simply have been released earlier. Zhukov's reports during the latter half of November informed Stalin that Army Group Centre was being 'bled white' and had no further reserves to call upon. The German attack maintained its slow

grinding progress through sheer grit and strength of will. Soviet forces at the front were equally exhausted, but also equally determined. The difference was the *Stavka*'s (Soviet High Command) careful husbanding of reserves for a counteroffensive, which Zhukov noted, 'had been prepared all through the defensive actions'.[13] Thus, one must be careful not to equate German proximity to Moscow in November and December 1941 as some kind of harbinger of victory. Even without the presence of Soviet reserves, the likelihood that German forces could have forcibly seized the heavily fortified Soviet capital in costly urban combat must be considered remote. Thus, Zhukov's offensive on 5 December did not somehow snatch victory from the very jaws of defeat. The reality of the battle for Moscow is less sensational, but no less important. The strategic circumstances governing the course of the battle did not suddenly change from one day to the next, Army Group Centre was in grave difficulties even before the new Soviet offensive was launched and its progress was never favourable. Indeed, for a range of reasons that this study will explore (logistics, reserves, weather, mobility, equipment, communications and infrastructure) Army Group Centre's November plans were wildly optimistic.

While the fall of Moscow was never a realistic possibility in November 1941, accounting for this requires much more than just an understanding of material factors. As my past studies of German campaigns in 1941 have shown, the German *Ostheer* (Eastern Army) had been seriously eroded in strength, but its men were also suffering from the mental fatigue of constant campaigning. Doubts about ending the war in the east were openly being discussed in the autumn months, and fears for the coming winter only added to the trepidation. Yet the same concerns also convinced many soldiers of the absolute necessity of the task at hand. A final assault on Moscow could, many hoped, decide the war in Germany's favour, as well as provide winter quarters for the men and perhaps even allow some to return home for Christmas. The hope this engendered and the resolution with which it fired German resolve should not be underestimated. For those same reasons the implications of Army Group Centre's ultimate failure at Moscow were all the more destructive.

For all the fortitude that the men of Army Group Centre could muster in November 1941 this was paralleled or even surpassed by Soviet determination. The brutal German occupation practices as well as the Wehrmacht's murderous treatment of Red Army captives were well publicised by the Soviet information bureau, uniting soldiers and

civilians, often to the bitter end, in their cause to defend Moscow. Cyrus Sulzberger, an American journalist based in Moscow at the start of the German offensive, recalled of the Soviet population:

> Moscow didn't present the aspect of a sorely threatened city whose outer limits were not too far from the raging battlefront. Its population gave the impression of going about its work with unusual seriousness, called on to perform special tasks necessitating extraordinary effort and attention. The prevailing calm reflected something fundamental in Muscovite temperament, perhaps based on the old Russian proverb: 'The maggot gnaws the cabbage but it dies before it's done.' There seems increasing confidence that the old cabbage would surfeit yet another maggot.[14]

While postwar Soviet accounts of the November period cited the people's courage and enthusiasm as well as the superior strategic planning of the *Stavka*, early western accounts tended to dismiss such explanations as communist propaganda. Of course, there were exaggerations in the writing of these Soviet histories, which certainly enhanced their propaganda value, but much of it had at least a basis in truth. Cold War suspicions, however, allowed little room for objective assessment of these claims and instead there was a much less critical embrace of German generals' memoirs, which uniformly dismissed Soviet explanations. Instead, the German failure before Moscow took on an entirely new explanation, one which would expunge the German army of any blame. As with so many events, the German generals found it convenient to blame Hitler, citing his diversion of Army Group Centre into Ukraine in August/September 1941. Through this decision, they argued, vital time was lost for the all-important drive on Moscow, leading to what they also characterised as a narrow failure.[15] The chief-of-staff of the Fourth Army, Major-General Günther Blumentritt, wrote after the war that the failure to take Moscow was a key turning point of the war in the east; 'our hopes of knocking Russia out of the war in 1941 had been dashed, at the very last minute. It was essential now that Germany's political leaders should realize that the days of the Blitzkrieg were over.'[16] In fact, as this study will reflect, it was the military commanders themselves that needed convincing. What is more, there was ample evidence available at the time (and presented to Halder at the Orsha conference) that the wide-ranging offensives and crushing, one-sided

battles were no longer to be expected. Yet the tendency of later histories to represent the battle of Moscow as a near-run contest gave an air of plausibility to the accounts of the generals, which also served to play down their own culpability for the failure of the operations around Moscow. Indeed, the most conspicuous absence from the generals' memoirs in this period is any personal responsibility for the critical decisions of November and early December 1941, in which the failure before Moscow saw the generals playing the leading role with only Hitler's tacit approval.

This study will revisit Army Group Centre's battle for Moscow in November and early December 1941, providing a fresh perspective on the landmark events that ended Hitler's five-and-half-month series of rolling offensives in the east. The aim will be to provide a detailed account of Army Group Centre's inner workings – its command structure, its decisions, its resources, its men and its strategic environment. This book may be seen as a continuation of my larger body of work on Germany in the east in 1941[17] or a stand-alone study detailing Germany's fortunes in the pivotal weeks of the battle for Moscow. As with my past studies, the best method of assessing Germany's offensive strength is through its panzer divisions, corps, groups and armies. Archival evidence at all these levels has been consulted, but the study also makes significant use of first-person accounts in the form of soldier's letters, war diaries and memoirs. The book will proceed chronologically beginning from Chapter 2. The first chapter, as in my past studies, will seek to further contextualise Hitler's war in the east through the exploration of thematic topics that impacted on the development of the military campaign. In this study, Chapter 1 will examine Hitler's war of annihilation (*Vernichtungskrieg*), which ultimately proved even more deadly than the conventional fighting,[18] and already by 1941 had seen the murder of hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians, both Jews and non-Jews. Assessing this vital aspect of the war is important both intrinsically and for the fact that it informed the manner in which the Wehrmacht conceived of its enemy in the east. It also formed the principal frame of reference for how the people of the Soviet Union were to understand the war that was being waged against them. Beyond the war of annihilation, I have also assessed the parallels and differences between Germany's eastern front in 1914 and 1941. This discussion further highlights German conceptions – and misconceptions – about warfare in the east in 1941, particularly the hubris associated with military planning. Yet a comparison of the two wars also reflects just how

much they differed and thereby the unique undertaking that Hitler's commitment in Operation Barbarossa represented.

On 29 November, Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's propaganda minister, reflected back on the preceding months of Germany's offensive in the east and wrote in his diary: 'There are good days and bad . . . From such a heavy fight one does not emerge without scars. It does not matter who comes out of such a fight with a black eye or bloody nose, it matters who is still standing firm in the ring; and that without doubt will be us.'[19] Clearly, even before Zhukov's famous winter counteroffensive the Red Army had dealt the Wehrmacht a few hard blows, which even Goebbels could not ignore. By comparison, Lieutenant-General Vassily Sokolovsky described to foreign journalists in Moscow that the Wehrmacht had sustained far more than a black eye or bloody nose. 'The Blitzkrieg, in its essentials, has been transformed into blitz-destruction of German men and materials. This began at [the battle of] Smolensk. The Blitzkrieg has developed into a continuous grinding of the German war machine. The process resembles [the battle of] Verdun, but in terms of ten or one hundred times the destruction'.[20] While Goebbels routinely understated the extent of the Wehrmacht's problems in the east, there can be no doubt that Soviet wartime propaganda also overstated them. This study will attempt to identify a middle road, charting the battle for Moscow from a strategic perspective, but hopefully without losing sight of the countless men like Sergei who died before it was over.

# 1 PARALLEL WARS

## Degrees of separation: the eastern front, 1914 and 1941

While Germany's eastern front in the Second World War is known for its enormous scale and unprecedented bloodletting, it is also significant that the conflict was prefaced only a generation before by another war, which accounted for millions more German, Austrian and Russian casualties. Indeed, no two countries have killed more of their opposing citizens than Germany and Russia. On the eastern front in the First World War, the combined number of German and Russian dead and missing (excluding all other nationalities) amounted to some 2.75 million men (750,000 Germans and 2 million Russians).[1] In spite of this imposing figure, in December 1940 Hitler set Germany on course to attack the Soviet Union, but not out of fear of the power of his rival in the east; it was precisely because he believed it could be carried through easily in one swift campaign.[2] Hitler's eye was on the plentiful mineral and oil riches, the vast fields of fertile earth and the abundant access to human labour, which could free him forever from Britain's continental blockade and provide the building blocks to a new autarkic German economy destined for world power status. Hitler had long prophesied the acquisition of *Lebensraum* (living space) in the east, and it was the short-lived German victory over Russia in the First World War that provided the precedent. In 1918, the newly created Soviet Union ceded 1.4 million km$^2$ of land, including the Baltic states, parts of Belorussia and Ukraine, to Germany in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk.[3] Yet, while Hitler and his generals were inclined to focus on

the ultimate defeat of the Russians in the First World War, they ignored the fact that Russia had fought tenaciously for over three years against Germany and its allies, the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires. Indeed, the German High Command of 1940–1 was influenced by a so-called 'Tannenberg myth', which contrasted a natural German military superiority with barbaric Russian hordes.[4] This not only reflected racial and cultural prejudices that impacted upon German behaviour in the east, but also pervaded their military plans and led to baseless assumptions that the war could be won in the initial border battles.[5] Indeed, the German victory at Tannenberg in August 1914 cast a long and imposing shadow, becoming the single most decisive, and accordingly best known, German battlefield victory of the First World War.[6] For Hitler and his generals the power of the 'Tannenberg myth' was reinforced by the fact that a single German army (the Eighth Army under Colonel-General Paul von Hindenburg)[7] managed to defeat superior Russian forces, while at the following battle of the Masurian Lakes it also turned back the Russian invasion of East Prussia.[8] Tannenberg was also unique for the manner in which it was won. Foreshadowing German successes with more mobile forms of warfare from 1939 to 1941, the German Eighth Army achieved a rare encirclement, destroying the Russian Second Army and capturing some 92,000 Russian prisoners of war with a further 50,000 killed and wounded.[9] For an outnumbered German army fighting initially on the defensive the result was easily exploited for propaganda purposes.[10]

Such perceptions flowed directly into the German planning for Operation Barbarossa in 1941. The Russian invasion of East Prussia in 1914 reflected the danger of a large-scale invasion from the east, which nearly doomed Germany in the earliest phase of the war as the bulk of the army was deployed in the west to carry out the invasion of Belgium and France (the Schlieffen Plan). The idea of an aggressive enemy in the east was immediately seized upon by Hitler to justify his invasion on 22 June 1941. He erroneously played on the notion of a belligerent Soviet Union and stated that in the weeks preceding the German attack, 'a renewed reinforcement of the Russian troop concentration along the eastern border of Germany took place. Armoured units and parachute troops were moved in increasing numbers alarmingly close to the German border.'[11] At the same time, Hitler suggested that German intentions in the east had been entirely peaceful:

> The German Wehrmacht and the German homeland know that, only a few weeks ago, not a single German panzer or motorized division was on our eastern border . . . The victory of the Axis powers in the Balkans alone prevented the plan to engage Germany in the battle in the southeast for months on end this summer, while, in the meantime, the concentration of Soviet armies would be completed, their readiness for battle reinforced, and then, together with England and supported by the expected American deliveries, Russia would suffocate and crush the German Reich and Italy.[12]

This was the Nazi myth of Operation Barbarossa as a preventative war, which played on the notion of a treacherous and hostile adversary in the east.[13] It also gave rise to frightful stories, exploited by Nazi propaganda, of Russian war crimes during their brief occupation of East Prussian lands in 1914.[14] Hoth, the commander of Panzer Group 3 in Army Group Centre's invasion of the Soviet Union, described the 'bestial cruelty' of the Russians in this period, while the commander of the XXXXIII Army Corps in Operation Barbarossa, General of Infantry Gotthard Heinrici, wrote that the Russians had perpetrated acts of 'blind destruction and mindless annihilation of a kind we would never have thought possible'.[15] It all acted to depict Hitler's attack as a defensive action, a pre-emptive war to save Germany and Europe from communist domination and untold cruelties.[16] However, this view of the Russians as both antagonistic towards Germany and remorseless in their behaviour was only one half of the Nazi *Feindbild*, or enemy image.

While 1914 supported the view that Russia posed a credible threat to Germany, it also provided a contrasting view of military weakness.[17] Tannenberg may have been the best known battle of the eastern campaign in the First World War, but it was also one of the least representative, assuming a disproportionate weight in the popular imagination. This, and the ultimate defeat of Russia in 1917, created a perception that Russia was militarily weak. The later Soviet setbacks in the Spanish Civil War and the Winter War against Finland further diminished the Red Army's image, allowing the Soviet Union to be cast in the opposing roles of an aggressive colossus looking to expand, while at the same time being portrayed as a weak state reliant more on the size of its armed forces than any military proficiency. By all accounts in 1941, against Hitler's Wehrmacht, Stalin's state would be unable to resist a German attack.[18] Vejas Liulevicius suggested that the experience of

German warfare and occupation in the east during the First World War accounted for many of the later perceptions and policies the Nazis adopted in the Second World War.[19] Even Germany's so-called *Ostforscher* (academic 'experts' on the east) were profoundly influenced by entrenched anti-Slavic and anti-Bolshevik beliefs and stereotypes.[20] With such plentiful historical and intellectual 'proof' for Nazi conceptions of the east, the parallel notions of attacking both a weak Soviet state and a threatening communist enemy provided convincing arguments for the pursuit of Hitler's *Lebensraum*.[21]

With German conviction in the veracity of their *Feindbild* little attention was paid to the reliability of its underlying assumptions. Some of the most senior German commanders in Operation Barbarossa had served for various periods on the eastern front in the First World War (Colonel-Generals Franz Halder and Ewald von Kleist, Field Marshals Erich von Manstein and Albrecht Kesselring), and they displayed a dismissive first-hand knowledge of the enemy. Field Marshal, Rundstedt, the commander of Army Group South, served on the eastern front from 1915 to 1918, but ascribed little combat value to the enemy in the east.[22] Bidding a final farewell to his counterpart from Army Group North, Field Marshal Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb, Rundstedt remarked in May 1941: 'Well then, see you again in Siberia.'[23] Such confidence was no doubt part of the Wehrmacht's resolute determination to carry out orders and meet whatever objectives it was set, but it was also a result of what German officers did not know about their enemy as opposed to what they did. Tannenberg may have instilled a confidence in the superiority of the German soldier over and above that of the Russian, but the campaigns in the east in 1914 were not simply defined by that one single battle. In 1914, as in 1941, a battle was not an end in itself and the failed Russian offensive in East Prussia was hardly the measure by which the tsar's armies should have been evaluated. As Holger Herwig concluded, 'The battles of Tannenberg and the Masurian Lakes, while freeing East Prussia of Russian forces and soothing the nervous national psyche, were peripheral to the outcome of the war.'[24]

While two Russian armies invaded East Prussia in August 1914, the majority of Russian forces upon mobilisation were directed towards the enormous front running from the border of neutral Romania to Cracow in Austrian Poland. Here four Russian armies (Third, Fourth, Fifth and Eighth) faced Germany's ally the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which deployed its strength to meet the Russian army as well as Serbia in the south. The Russian–Austrian frontier was to be the main theatre for

most of the fighting in the east in 1914. The August/September battles in Galicia were confused and bloody affairs, but ultimately the Russian armies, after initial setbacks, gained the upper hand and advanced over 200 km into Austro-Hungarian territory. Losses for the Austro-Hungarian army numbered some 400,000 men, almost three times the Russian losses at Tannenberg.[25] Yet the German victory in East Prussia came to form the dominant picture of war against Russia for Germany. Nor was it accurate or fair to explain Russian successes in Galicia as caused by Austro-Hungarian weaknesses.[26] Although many Germans subscribed to this view at the time, the Austrians had in fact committed many of their best formations to the Galician campaign, while the mass of the army was at this point still riding high on patriotic fervour and was not yet gripped by internal ethnic divisions or war weariness.[27] What is more, the Russians at Tannenberg and in the early setbacks in Galicia reflected a remarkable ability to bounce back from their defeats, as would also be seen in 1941.

Believing in the infallibility of the German Wehrmacht and buttressed by the scornful assessment such notions as the Tannenberg myth and Nazi racial ideology provided, Hitler's *Ostheer* surged across the German–Soviet border in June 1941 intent on fighting a short, victorious campaign. It was anticipated that the initial border battles, the encirclement of the Red Army's first strategic echelon set within the first 300 km of the Soviet border, would largely decide the war. Thereafter, the German advance would face little serious opposition and could proceed towards its distant objectives in something akin to a 'railway advance', a concept derived from the German experiences in Russia during 1918 when the absence of resistance enabled German soldiers simply to ride the Russian railways from one station to the next capturing towns and soldiers.[28] To the German command in 1941 the initial weeks were to prove the most decisive, and already by the second day of the offensive Halder proclaimed operations at Army Group Centre to be proceeding 'according to plan' and talked of soon achieving 'full operational freedom' behind the shattered Soviet front.[29] On the same day, in response to an assessment by Lieutenant-General Friedrich Paulus, the Senior Quartermaster 1 at the *Oberkommando des Heeres* (Army High Command – OKH), that the campaign would be of short duration, Field Marshal Walter von Brauchitsch is said to have responded: 'Yes, Paulus, you may be right, we shall probably need six to eight weeks for finishing Russia.'[30] Indeed, in the first ten days of the campaign Army

Group Centre won what it viewed as a crushing victory over the Red Army in the battle of Minsk. The number of troops encircled was double that of Tannenberg and Army Group Centre's panzer and motorised divisions were already pressing ahead towards Smolensk. By 19 July 1941, Hitler was sufficiently confident to issue War Directive 33, the tone of which pointed to a war already won on the central front. 'The second series of battles in the East has ended', it proclaimed, with 'mopping up' operations in Army Group Centre required to eliminate the remaining resistance. Thereafter, the next phase of the campaign would have to 'prevent any further sizable enemy forces from withdrawing into the depths of Russia, and to wipe them out'.[31] The Red Army, however, had no intention of withdrawing into the depths of Russia, and the battle of Smolensk was in fact only just getting underway with weeks of bitter and costly fighting to come.[32] Nor was the Soviet response unprecedented. In 1914, in the aftermath of the annihilation of the Russian Second Army at Tannenberg, the accompanying Russian First Army steadfastly refused to retreat from East Prussia and had to be forced out in the September fighting at the Masurian Lakes. Even then a renewed Russian invasion of East Prussia followed a few weeks later when the Russian Tenth Army attempted to reopen the campaign at the battle of Augustow (29 September–5 October 1914).[33]

In the immediate aftermath of the encirclement at Smolensk in 1941 the Germans once again proclaimed a crushing victory.[34] Army Group Centre had advanced another 300 km to the east and captured another 300,000 Soviet POWs. A German victory seemed beyond dispute, but the six- to eight-week timeframe for finishing the Soviet Union, which Brauchitsch had so confidently forecast, had almost elapsed and there was no indication that the war was nearing its end. A solid Soviet front was still holding in the east, more Soviet armies were assembling, and it was the Red Army that took to the offensive against Army Group Centre from early August until the second week of September. Field Marshal Fedor von Bock's army group was in no way prepared for such an eventuality and the defensive front repeatedly threatened to buckle wherever motorised reserves could not be found to plug local Soviet breakthroughs. As Halder noted on 15 August:

> The front of the army group, with its 40 divisions over 730 kilometres is so strained that moving to a determined defence entails far-reaching considerations, which have not been thought through in detail. The present deposition and line organisation is in no way suited for a sustained defence.[35]

On 25 August, General of Infantry Hermann Geyer, commanding the defending IX Army Corps, reported to Army Group Centre that Soviet attacks against the 263rd Infantry Division had resulted in roughly 2,100 casualties in August alone, and that such losses 'cannot be borne much longer'.[36] He also stated that the fighting resembled the trench warfare and artillery duels of the western front in the First World War. Geyer noted that the same routine repeated itself over and over again; an immense Soviet bombardment followed by a massed ground assault into the German defences, and concluded by local German counterattacks to repel the frequent penetrations.[37] Not surprisingly in such conditions the exhaustion of the German infantry divisions reached dangerous levels; towards the end of August the 161st Infantry Division, for example, was estimated to possess just 25 per cent of its combat strength and in eight days of heavy fighting had lost roughly 2,000 men and 57 officers.[38] At Army Group Centre, Bock was frantic. He had been warning since the middle of the month about the weakening of his front and the inability to hold sustained defensive positions, but now it appeared that a disintegration of the front was at hand. Speaking on the phone, Bock told Halder on the morning of 28 August: 'I must report to you that the situation on the defensive front of Ninth Army is very serious. It is such that an end to the resistance is foreseeable if the Russians remain on the offensive.' Finally, Bock asked the decisive question: 'What should I do then if as a result the front collapses?'[39]

Of course, the enormous pressure exerted against Bock's front also came at a tremendous cost to the Red Army, which decisively weakened the Soviet fronts defending Moscow in the lead-up to the renewal of Bock's October offensive.[40] Yet by mid-September, after almost three months of warfare, Operation Barbarossa had clearly failed to bring about its single most important objective. The Soviets had doggedly survived the German offensive, but unlike 1914, when the failure of the Schlieffen Plan led to the replacement of the Chief of the Great General Staff (General Erich von Falkenhayn replaced General Helmuth Johann Ludwig von Moltke), there were no such repercussions for Barbarossa's failure. This is perhaps even more surprising given that during the summer of 1941 Hitler had engaged in a long and bitter dispute with his generals over German strategy in the east and the opposition was led by Halder, the Chief of the Army General Staff.[41] Unlike Kaiser Wilhelm II, Hitler asserted himself over his generals and

dominated the direction of the military campaign in the east. Indeed, while Army Group Centre's infantry were holding the line throughout August and September most of Bock's mobile divisions were dispatched south on Hitler's orders to cut off and encircle the Soviet Southwestern Front in Ukraine.[42] Indeed, on 14 September, when the lead panzer division from Bock's army group finally made contact with the forces of Army Group South coming up from Kremenchug, Lieutenant-General Walther Model instructed that the password for his forces be 'Tannenberg'.[43] By the same token, Colonel-General Maximilian Freiherr von Weichs, the commander of the Second Army who participated in the battle of Kiev, later wrote: 'One may think about the significance of the battle for the overall conduct of war as one will, in any case, military historians will compare the operational implementation of the battle by the commander of Army Group South as worthy of comparisons to battles such as Cannae and Tannenberg.'[44] Without disputing the decisiveness of such battles, the German generals nevertheless missed the fundamental point that in 1914 and 1941 even their greatest battles did not necessarily determine the outcome of their campaigns or wars. At Tannenberg, Cannae and Kiev the victor ultimately lost.

Even before the conclusion to the battle of Kiev Hitler accepted the OKH's view that a drive on Moscow should follow the fighting in Ukraine, and the dictator ordered planning to begin immediately. The drive into Ukraine was not even two weeks old, but on 6 September Hitler signed War Directive 35 ordering yet another major offensive to the east by Army Group Centre due to commence at the end of September (but subsequently delayed until 2 October). Without a word of mention about the staggering losses of the campaign or the run-down condition of the motorised and panzer divisions, Hitler imposed a tremendous new undertaking on the hard-pressed *Ostheer*. War Directive 35 commanded that the Soviet forces defending Moscow be 'annihilated in the limited time which remains before the onset of winter'.[45] It then went on to insist that an advance on Moscow should follow, which at the time was still another 300 km to the east. Such ambitious operations so late in the year were not only folly given the conditions of the *Ostheer* and the fact that a victory at Kiev was still far from assured, but they took no account of the Red Army's remarkable resilience, which as much as any other factor had derailed Operation Barbarossa. There was also the ominous precedent of the German offensive towards Warsaw in 1914.

At the end of September 1914 the new German Ninth Army, consisting of most of the German forces in the east, launched an offensive from Silesia to threaten Russia's control of Poland, supported three days later by their Austrian-Hungarian allies from the south. Initially, the armies of the Central Powers made progress (as well as taking thousands of Russian POWs) in spite of the appalling weather conditions and deep mud.[46] Russian forces were purposefully falling back and carefully concentrating forces for a massive counterblow from across the Vistula. The German Ninth Army missed the danger and believed they were simply exploiting the weakness of the Russian positions north of Warsaw. The Ninth Army's Chief of the Staff, General Erich Ludendorff, openly proclaimed victory and pressed on to seize Warsaw.[47] Yet the timely detection of well-placed Russian dispositions quickly convinced Ludendorff and Hindenburg[48] of the perilous danger to their left flank, and a retreat was quickly undertaken on 18 October that took them all the way back to their starting positions near Breslau.[49] According to General Erich von Falkenhayn, the new Chief of the Army General Staff, this operation had nevertheless resulted in 'very serious losses',[50] while Russian forces were only 320 km from Berlin. At the same time, Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich, the commander of the Russian front, wrote to the French commander Joseph Joffre of 'the greatest victory since the beginning of the war'.[51]

While the Germans opted for retreat, the Austrian-Hungarians were less prudent and their First Army lost 40,000 men after being caught in the flank by a Russian counterattack. Additionally, in the subsequent retreat the fortress of Przemysl was cut off with some 150,000 soldiers inside (and destined to fall to the Russians in the coming winter).[52] The events of October 1914 were certainly of a smaller scale than October 1941, but just as Ludendorff and Hindenburg courted peril in their quest for Warsaw, Hitler, with even less caution, risked everything on his march to Moscow. Initial successes in each operation only tempted the attackers into greater risk-taking, all the while dismissive of Russian/Soviet countermeasures. Indeed, the willingness of the Russians to concede ground, bide their time and await the opportune moment to strike an oncoming enemy featured in October 1914 and at the end of Bock's autumn offensive in early December 1941.[53] Moreover, the underestimation of Russian/Soviet forces in the aftermath of German success is characteristic of both 1914 and 1941. As Hew Strachan noted of German operations in October 1914: 'Excessive German ambition in

**Figure 1.1** German troops on the eastern front in Poland (1914–15)

relation to numerical strength … explain the unravelling of the Hindenburg–Ludendorff master-plan.'[54] The same is true of 1941 with Hitler, Halder and Bock bearing the weight of responsibility.

Hitler and Halder viewed their drive on Moscow, codenamed Operation Typhoon, as the last great offensive of 1941, which would finally strike down the Soviet colossus. They still believed that a winter campaign could be avoided and the Red Army decisively defeated before

operations came to a halt. Indeed, when the bulk of the Soviet armies defending Moscow were encircled in early October, the Reich Press Chief, Dr Otto Dietrich, was told by Hitler on 9 October that the Soviet Union was stricken and would never rise again.[55] Accordingly, Dietrich proclaimed to the international press: 'The campaign in the east has been decided by the smashing of Army Group Timoshenko.'[56] The following day (10 October) the *Völkischer Beobachte*, a Nazi daily newspaper, carried banner headlines extolling the news: 'The Great Hour has Struck!'; 'Campaign in the East Decided!'; 'The Military End of the Bolsheviks'.[57] The hubris of the Nazi state was soon laid bare when events on the ground did not match German predictions. Operation Typhoon was slowed first by the elimination of the large Soviet pockets at Viaz'ma[58] and Briansk and then, as the advance attempted to resume, by the biannual Russian difficulties caused by heavy rains and melting snow known as the *rasputitsa*. Bock's panzer and motorised divisions were restricted to the few available roads, which allowed the Soviets to concentrate their meagre resources to slow them. At the same time, Soviet defensive efforts focused on preparing the Mozhaisk Defensive Line, which sought to block the main approaches to Moscow at the four main approaches to the Soviet capital: Volokolamsk, Mozhaisk, Maloiaroslavets and Kaluga. Throughout the remainder of October Bock's forces assaulted and took each of the four defensive bastions on the road to Moscow, but the fighting exhausted the combat formations and depleted their ranks. The autumn conditions had also hindered the forward movement of supplies to such an extent that German forces were frequently cut off from resupply. Some men did not eat for days, horses starved or collapsed, vehicles had no fuel, guns no munitions and in many units there was also no sign of the long promised winter clothing. At its nearest point Army Group Centre was still 80 km short of Moscow and Soviet resistance was stiffening. The mud and rain denied the German motorised divisions their speed and rapid manoeuvreability, making every attack a costly frontal assault, while the success of any renewed push forward only extended the distance supplies had to travel. The army group's files reveal that many middle-ranking officers were pleading with the higher authorities for an operational pause in order to allow supplies and men to reach the front (many of the divisions were badly strung out as 'light' combat formations were sent forward to keep the advance moving). Moreover, the huge effort exerted throughout the second half of October to maintain the advance through the

*rasputitsa* convinced many officers that the army group would do better to await the arrival of the first winter frosts when the ground would again harden and allow movement to resume. Hitler, Halder and Bock, however, had been convinced by their successes at Viaz'ma and Briansk, and were determined to exploit the enormous breach in the Soviet front. Yet no set of orders from above could change the conditions on the ground, and by the last week of October the army group's advance had slowed to a crawl. At the end of the month Bock at last called a halt to Typhoon, but planning began almost at once for a renewed offensive towards Moscow in November.[59]

It was at this period in the campaign that memories of 1914 did in fact play a profound part in the motivations and thinking of the German high command. To contemporary observers, the question often asked is why the German command did not adopt winter quarters once it became clear that Operation Typhoon had ground to a halt and the dreaded Russian winter beckoned. Yet few of the principal German commanders entertained any such notion of assuming winter positions while still short of Moscow. Understanding this has a lot to do with the Wehrmacht's own offensive ethos, which itself has long roots in German military culture,[60] but was sharpened by the adoption of new tactics and technology in the aftermath of the First World War.[61] The Wehrmacht's leadership was also accepting of the Nazi concept, personified by Hitler, of individual 'will', which denoted leadership qualities capable of bending events to serve any objective. Failure to do so was a reflection on the individual not the circumstances. The requisite 'will' to carry out an order or achieve an objective was therefore accorded decisive importance.[62] In early November 1941 suggesting the advance on Moscow should be abandoned or that the conditions had become too difficult for another offensive flew in the face of the Wehrmacht's prevailing military culture as well as its proven modus operandi for success. Yet if the battle of Tannenberg provided the ideal model for what the Germans wanted to achieve in the east in 1941, there was another dominant memory from 1914 that they wanted to avoid at all costs. In September 1914, the western allies proclaimed the so-called 'Miracle of the Marne', the battle that finally stopped the German offensive sweeping through northern France and denying them outright victory. As the western front quickly transformed into the stalemate of trench warfare many later German commanders viewed the failure not as a reflection of an overly ambitious campaign objective or the prevailing battlefield conditions, rather it was

a result of excessive caution and a failure to press the attack on Paris with every means possible in the hope of clinching the decisive success. Now Moscow was the objective and too much caution or a failure to press the attack were the lessons of 1914 that should not be forgotten. A new cult of the offensive, which had already pushed the German armies well beyond their limits in Operation Barbarossa, was still alive and well in Operation Typhoon. Weichs claimed after the war that he had suggested adopting winter positions before the ground hardened and prevented the digging of defensive fieldworks, but, as he recalled, 'I was accused of not supporting the offensive'. As a veteran of the eastern front in the First World War, Weichs claimed: 'I know from experiences in the First World War how quickly winter falls here – and it is far more extreme than in central Europe. I doubted whether the operation against Moscow was still feasible this year.'[63]

It is important to acknowledge that in 1914 and 1941 each of the states that went to war were fundamentally different; Wilhelm II's Imperial Germany was not analogous to Hitler's Nazi regime any more than Nicholas II's Russian Empire was to be equated with Stalin's Soviet Union. Yet the experience of war in 1914 impacted upon the peoples who fought them and left legacies that affected the perception of events in 1941, even if some of these were rooted in exaggeration or even outright falsehood. While the Wehrmacht's commanders indulged a Tannenberg-inspired myth of superiority, this was just as ignorant of their experiences against the Russians in 1914 as it was of the more recent performance of the Red Army in its brief war against Japan in 1939. These diverged sharply from the common perception of a bungling Soviet Union in the Winter War with Finland.

There was an even greater distortion of the Soviet enemy based on Nazi racial ideas, which exploited the brief Russian occupation of East Prussia in 1914 to give rise to the most virulent depictions of savage easterners. According to one sensationalised account from 1914: 'The Russian army resembled migrating rats who, in times of great destruction, forsake their hiding places in the Siberian tundra in order to eat bare the settled lands. Ever fresh hordes come forth in a brown milling mass from the seething steppe.'[64] With a foundation in such hostile propaganda, it is hardly surprising that notions of the Soviet communist state as a threatening godless enemy of 'cultured' Europe found fertile ground in 1941, and it goes some distance towards explaining why so many ordinary German men, including the entire command of the *Ostheer*,

embraced Hitler's war of annihilation.[65] Moreover, the First World War record of German conduct in the occupied lands of the east, while by no means analogous to the extremes of the Wehrmacht, nevertheless included plundering and exploitation.[66]

Although clear differences existed, the events of 1941 were not always distinct from those of 1914. Separated by only a generation, the parallel wars in Germany's east provide many insights into how and why Barbarossa and Typhoon were conducted in the way they were. Certainly, the Wehrmacht's generals sought answers from 1914, but only tended to heed the lessons that bolstered their preconceived ideas about the enemy they faced and the victorious war they intended to fight. A more objective assessment showed the Russian army to be a far more formidable foe, posing a very real threat to German war plans in both 1914 and 1941.

## Nazi Germany's war of annihilation

A fundamental aspect of the battle for Moscow was that it took place in a period after German plans had anticipated final victory. This had grave implications for the development of German operations during the battle (which will be explored in detail in subsequent chapters), however, it also had a profound effect on the way in which the war was being fought by November 1941. The radicalisation of Nazi policy in the east had already begun in the planning phase of Operation Barbarossa, but the full horror of Nazi Germany's conception of warfare was revealed only as the campaign developed. By the battle for Moscow thousands of innocent Soviet civilians or defenceless POWs were dying every day. This in turn radicalised Soviet responses to the war and helped to galvanise support for Stalin's regime. Hitler's war of annihilation therefore provides another important strategic context for the battle of Moscow in which the operations at the front were directly impacted by the killings at the rear – killings that, by November 1941, were already unprecedented in the modern era.

On the morning of 30 March 1941 Hitler spoke to an assembly of around 100 senior Wehrmacht officers for two and half hours on the upcoming war against the Soviet Union. Hitler made it clear that the war he intended to fight in the east was to be very different from the one he had ordered in the west.[67] As the Chief of the Army General Staff,

Halder, noted in his diary Operation Barbarossa was to be a 'Clash of two ideologies.' Hitler then took aim at the nature of the Soviet state. 'Crushing denunciation of Bolshevism, identified with social criminality. Communism is an enormous danger for our future. We must forget the concept of comradeship between soldiers. A communist is no comrade before or after the battle. This is a war of annihilation ... We do not wage war to preserve the enemy.' Halder then recorded how Hitler foresaw the role of the army in his new 'war of annihilation'. In order to achieve the 'extermination of the Bolshevist commissars and of the communist foe', Hitler made clear that there would be 'no job for military courts. The individual troop commander must know the issues at stake. They must be the leaders in this fight ... Commissars and GUP men are criminals and must be treated as such.' There could be no doubt about the methods to which Hitler was referring. In fact, Halder's account concludes with Hitler insisting: 'Commanders must make the sacrifice of overcoming their personal scruples.'[68] Hitler need not have worried. Not only was the army leadership prepared to back such policies, but they in fact took the initiative in drafting the so-called 'criminal orders' that would instigate important aspects of the killing process.[69] Days before Hitler made his speech, Brauchitsch, the Commander-in-Chief of the Army, had told senior commanders of the *Ostheer* on 27 March that: 'The troops have to realise that this struggle is being waged by one race against the other, and proceed with the necessary harshness.'[70] That harshness was embodied by the two most notorious criminal orders, which the army issued on 13 May and 6 June 1941. The first was known as the *Erlaß über die Ausübung der Kriegsgerichtsbarkeit im Gebiet 'Barbarossa' und über besondere Maßnahmen der Truppe* ('Decree on the Exercise of Martial Jurisdiction in the Area "Barbarossa" and Special Measures of the Troops').[71] The order freed German soldiers from the possibility of any form of prosecution for war crimes committed in the Soviet Union (except for sexual misdeeds with what were judged to be racially inferior Slavs),[72] while at the same time opening the way to collective reprisals of 'suspects' deemed to have engaged in 'criminal action'. The second criminal order was titled the *Richtlinien für die Behandlung politischer Kommissare* ('Guidelines for the Treatment of Political Commissars'),[73] and required that upon capture these men be separated from other prisoners of war and promptly shot.[74] Importantly, these orders were specifically directed towards the officers of the Wehrmacht,

who were then required to carry out the executions independently of the *Schutzstaffel* (SS) or *Sicherheitsdienst* (SD).

In contrast to the flood of postwar claims from German generals proclaiming their opposition to such orders, at the time there was hardly a murmur of disagreement. Following Hitler's morning address on 30 March, Major-General Walter Warlimont attended a lunch hosted by Hitler for all the army commanders of the upcoming eastern campaign, yet, according to Warlimont, 'none of those present availed themselves of the opportunity even to mention the demands made by Hitler during the morning'.[75] Not only was there no active resistance from the generals, but many of them independently decided to issue orders to their troops explaining the necessity for harsh measures in the east. On 2 May, Colonel-General Erich Hoepner, commander of Panzer Group 4, instructed his men:

> the war against Russia is an important chapter in the struggle for the existence of the German nation. It is the old battle of the Germanic against the Slavic peoples, of the defence of European culture against the Moscovite-Asiatic inundation, and the repulse of Jewish Bolshevism. The objective of this battle must be the destruction of present-day Russia and it must therefore be conducted with unprecedented severity. Every military action must be guided in planning and execution by an iron resolution to exterminate the enemy remorselessly and totally. In particular, no adherents of the contemporary Russian Bolshevik system are to be spared.[76]

Colonel-General Eugen Ritter von Schobert, who commanded the Eleventh Army, not only pledged to kill all captured political officers of the Red Army, but also ordered 'political commissars of the civil administration to be shot without further ado'.[77] Such a blatant extension of the killing process was in no way required by the army guidelines, showing the scope for radicalisation from below.

While the Wehrmacht maintained a far closer adherence to the Geneva Convention during the western campaign in 1940,[78] the Commissar Order and the Barbarossa Jurisdiction Decree effectively granted *carte blanche* for war crimes against the Soviet political establishment and civilian population.[79] Even more revealing, these new orders were greeted with hardly any dissent. On 4 June, Bock complained that the Barbarossa Jurisdiction Decree 'was not

compatible with discipline',[80] and requested changes from the OKH. When these were not forthcoming, Bock contacted Brauchitsch and was told that the order 'was intended as I wished to interpret it'.[81] This was precisely the problem. Officers may insist upon 'discipline' or allow their men to engage in all manner of excesses. Significantly, Bock's opposition was not based on any moral outrage or concern for the Soviet populace, but rather his strict adherence to preserving the essential military ethos of order and discipline within the ranks. German officers were much more opposed to a 'wild', indiscriminate killing by their troops than they were to a measured and orderly execution. It was the process that mattered more than any moral quibbles about the outcome. Indeed, for the more questioning elements within the Wehrmacht's officer corps the murder of suspect elements was still an acceptable instrument of policy if administered correctly and determined by an officer rather than a private. Four days into the war General of Panzer Troops Joachim Lemelsen, the commander of the XXXXVII Panzer Corps, protested against the 'senseless shootings' being carried out by his men. 'This is murder!' He proclaimed with indignation. Yet while Lemelsen complained that such killings were being conducted 'in an irresponsible, senseless and criminal manner', he nevertheless went on to express support for Hitler's order that commissars and partisans 'should be taken aside and shot'.[82] Lemelsen was clearly prepared to embrace the killing process, as long as it was authorised from above and conducted in a 'responsible' manner. Similarly, Lieutenant-General John Ansat, the commander of the 102nd Infantry Division, stated that his soldiers were 'no hangman's assistants' and refused to carry out the order to kill commissars. At the same time, however, Ansat ensured that captured political officers were separated from other POWs and delivered into the hands of 'other units' (presumably the Field Gendarmerie or the SS) who could assume responsibility for the executions.[83]

Notwithstanding the grumblings of a select minority of generals, there was certainly no outcry of resistance to the criminal orders within the *Ostheer*. After the war men such as Colonel-General Heinz Guderian and Manstein, who emerged as the public faces of the Wehrmacht through their best-selling memoirs, categorically denied any involvement in the dissemination or implementation of the criminal orders.[84] In fact, however, the orders were distributed and carried out by both men. At his postwar trial, Manstein was found guilty of multiple counts of compliance with the Commissar Order during his command of the Eleventh

Army,[85] while evidence from Guderian's Panzer Group 2 shows that 183 commissars were shot up until the end of October 1941.[86] Colonel-General Hermann Hoth, who commanded the neighbouring Panzer Group 3 until early October 1941, also wrote a memoir centred solely on his panzer group's operations in the east during the summer of 1941. Yet in this account discussion of the criminal orders is conspicuously absent.[87] Hoth was another of the generals to have issued an order of the day proclaiming the German 'superiority of race' over 'Asiatic barbarism', and then concluding: 'This fight can be ended only by the destruction of one or the other of us. There is no room for compromise.'[88] It is therefore hardly surprising that an intelligence officer in Hoth's Panzer Group 3 reported at the beginning of August 1941 that the Commissar Order was implemented without 'any problem for the troops', and that 170 commissars had already been executed.[89] The unparalleled research of Felix Römer, who investigated the implementation of the Commissar Order in all the German divisions on the eastern front, confirms just how extensive its application in fact was. Römer found evidence that Soviet political officers were executed in all thirteen armies, all forty-four army corps, and more than 80 per cent of the almost 150 German front-line divisions. Moreover, if one includes cases that are more suggestive than explicit in their mention of carrying out the order, the number of divisions rises to over 90 per cent.[90]

The Barbarossa Jurisdiction Decree, exempting German soldiers from prosecution for war crimes, produced its own victims but without defining the target group. In short, Soviet citizens could be killed at any time and for almost any reason. Nowhere was the Wehrmacht more deeply implicated in the killing process than in anti-partisan warfare.[91] Stalin's famous radio appeal of 3 July 1941, extolling the formation of partisan detachments throughout the occupied areas was seen by Hitler as an opportunity 'to eliminate anything that opposes us' and 'to shoot dead anyone who even looks at us askance'.[92] The military leadership soon acted to ensure that there was no ambiguity in what was expected. War Directive 33a, issued on 23 July 1941, stipulated that resistance in the rear areas should be quelled, 'not by legal punishment of the guilty, but by striking such terror into the population that it loses all will to resist. The commanders concerned are to be held responsible, together with the troops at their disposal, for quiet conditions in their areas. They will contrive to maintain order, not by requesting reinforcements, but by employing suitably draconian methods.'[93] Needless to say, there was no