



COMBAT

Barbarossa 1941

German Infantryman

VERSUS

Soviet Rifleman

David Campbell



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Introduction

‘The whole thing should be over in three or four weeks, they said, others were more cautious and gave it two or three months. There was even one who said it would take a whole year, but we laughed him right out. “Why, how long did the Poles take us, and how long to settle France?”’ (quoted in Kershaw 2010: 22). So said Schütze Benno Zeiser, recalling the bright confidence with which he and most of his comrades greeted the idea of invading the Soviet Union. Operation *Barbarossa*, launched at 0315hrs on Sunday 22 June 1941,



was the largest invasion in the history of warfare in the midst of probably the most significant war in modern human experience. It was the defining act of the European theatre of war, setting the course of the conflict for the next four years in a struggle whose vast scope often disguises the reality of the conflict as much as it explains it.

For the ordinary German infantryman or Soviet rifleman, though, the enormity of such a stage was all but invisible, an abstraction for the most part that bore only a tangential relationship to the practical and immediate reality of movement, attack and defence. The success of one's army or nation was seen and understood through the prism of everyday experience, an experience that had been rather harsh for Soviet soldiers who had endured the relative failures of the Polish campaign and the outright embarrassments of Finland a few months later. However, to be a German soldier in the early summer of 1941 was quite something. The nation fielded a professional, experienced army, the Heer, with successful campaigns in Poland, Norway, France and the Low Countries, Yugoslavia and Greece, an army that had employed new armoured and combined-arms tactics to great strategic effect.

For the Germans, the prospective war in the East was from the very beginning ideological, its reasoning knotted together from policies like *Lebensraum* ('living space', the idea that 'superior' races would have the need and the right to expand into lands of 'inferior' races), virulent anti-communism, disgust at the perceived racial inferiority of the Slavic peoples, and an ideal of a pan-Germanic state that would stretch through East Prussia and Poland into Byelorussia and the Ukraine, uniting ethnic Germans across the East. For the men and women of the Soviet Union the rapacity of their Teutonic neighbours raised few qualms, however, protected as they felt they were behind the practical buffer of eastern Poland and the political buffer of 1939's Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact. That they were ideological enemies was never in doubt, and there was certainty that war would be inevitable at some stage, but it seemed unlikely that Hitler would open a new front while still fighting against Britain in the West, and while the German state still received so many vital goods (e.g. petroleum, chromium) from the Soviet Union in trade.

The decision to invade the Soviet Union was confirmed by Hitler's Directive 21 on 18 December 1940. The plan called for a massive invasion across the frontier; there were two thrusts, split by the Pripet Marshes. To the north, Heeresgruppe Nord would make for Leningrad and Heeresgruppe Mitte would attack towards Minsk, then Smolensk and ultimately Moscow, while to the south Heeresgruppe Süd would strike into the Ukraine towards Kiev. All three *Heeresgruppen* were tasked with the destruction of the Soviet Union's armed forces and the subsequent capture of economically and strategically valuable targets, with the majority of the Wehrmacht's might being concentrated in Generalfeldmarschall Fedor von Bock's Heeresgruppe Mitte, a force of 51 divisions that included two great armoured formations, Generaloberst Heinz Guderian's Panzergruppe 2 and Generaloberst Hermann Hoth's Panzergruppe 3.

Opposing the Germans was the Red Army, formally known as the RKKKA (*Raboche-krest'yanskaya Krasnaya armiya*, or 'Workers' and Peasants' Red Army'). This vast force of over five million men – well over two million of whom were defending the western approaches of the Soviet Union – was equipped

OPPOSITE

German infantry catch an impromptu ride, sitting on the folded-down side panels of an SdKfz 10/4 mounting a 2cm FlaK 30/38 cannon. For the Wehrmacht, motorization was not just a matter of equipping infantry with trucks to allow them to move about more quickly. Using mobility, flexibility and the rapid concentration of force and firepower to achieve decisive results, the motorized-infantry regiments were an integral part of the complex and highly trained combined-arms teams that made the great tactical and operational successes of Blitzkrieg possible. In the first six weeks of the invasion the men of Infanterie-Regiment (mot.) 41, Infanterie-Regiment (mot.) 15 and Infanterie-Regiment (mot.) *Großdeutschland* would fight their way through three echelons of increasingly vicious and resistant Soviet armies. The three engagements featured in this book – an encounter battle, contesting a city and then clashing along a dangerously stretched perimeter – show the Germans' shift from offensive to defensive fighting, as well as the limitations of motorized-warfare tactics. (Nik Cornish at www.stavka.org.uk)

Central sector, Operation *Barbarossa*, June and July 1941

1 22–27 June: the Axis invasion begins at 0315hrs on 22 June; Generalfeldmarschall Fedor von Bock's Heeresgruppe Mitte – consisting of 4. Armee, 9. Armee, Generaloberst Hermann Hoth's Panzergruppe 3 and Generaloberst Heinz Guderian's Panzergruppe 2 – strikes across the Bug River, bypassing the fortress of Brest-Litovsk to the north and south. Bock's *Panzergruppen* lance forward in a giant pincer movement to envelop Bialystok and Minsk, snapping shut on 27 June.

2 22 June–4 July: 10. Infanterie-Division (mot.), commanded by Generalleutnant Friedrich-Wilhelm Löper, moves into Byelorussia with General der Panzertruppen Leo Geyr von Schweppenburg's XXIV. Armeekorps (mot.), which also includes 3. and 4. Panzer-Divisionen. 10. Infanterie-Division (mot.) moves along the Brest-Litovsk highway, helps to stem an attempted break-out from the Bialystok–Minsk *Kessel*, passes through Sluzk and arrives at Bobruisk on the Berezina River, crossing over on a pontoon bridge on 4 July.

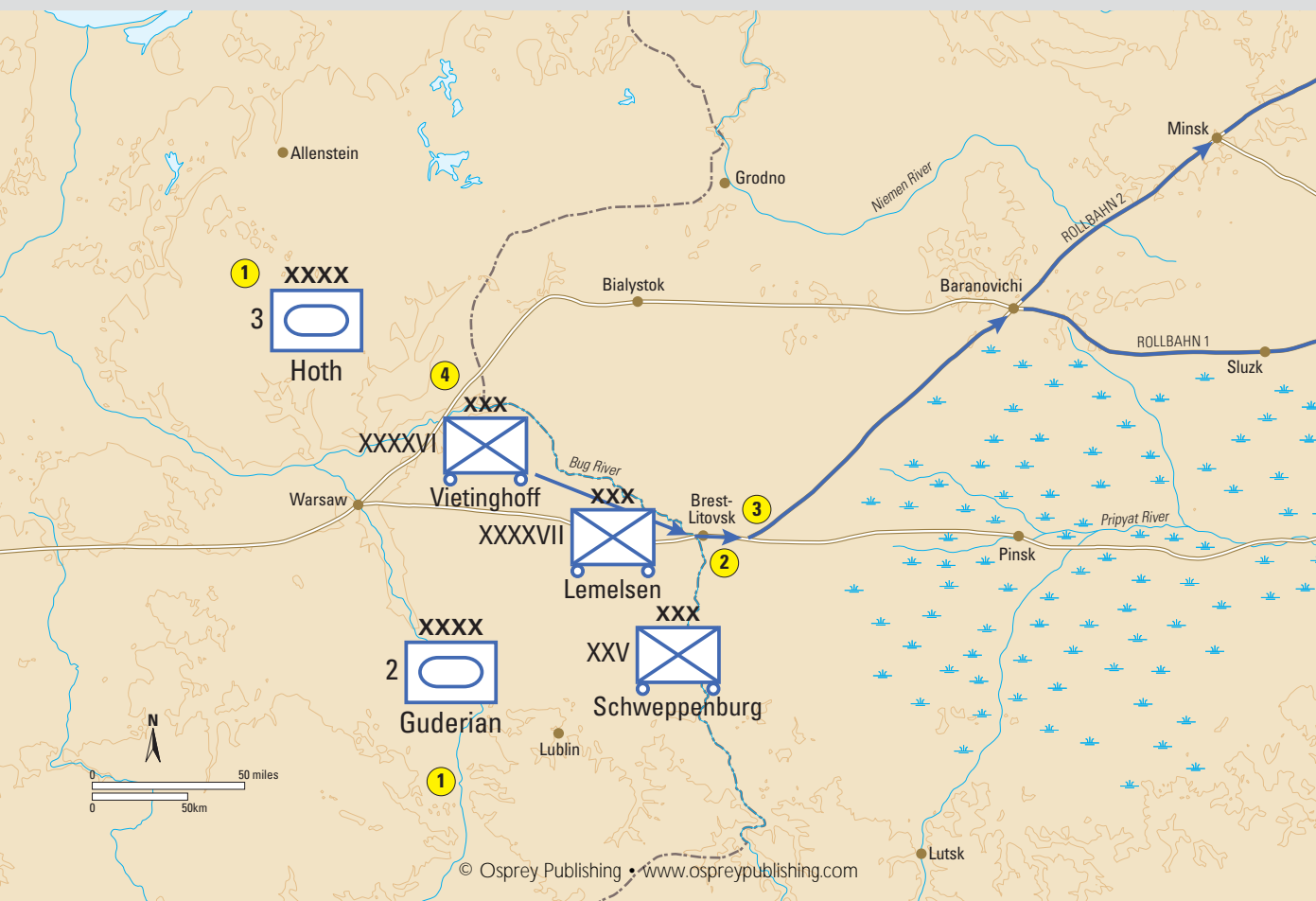
3 22 June–3 July: 29. Infanterie-Division (mot.), commanded by Generalmajor Walter von Boltstern, moves across the border to the north of Brest-Litovsk with General der Panzertruppe Joachim Lemelsen's XXXVII. Armeekorps (mot.), which also includes 17. and 18. Panzer-Divisionen. The

division moves up 'R2' (Rollbahn 2 – the main Warsaw–Minsk highway), helps in the fighting around the edges of the Minsk *Kessel*, and strikes east towards the Dnieper River.

4 27 June–2 July: Infanterie-Regiment (mot.) *Großdeutschland* – a part of General der Panzertruppe Heinrich von Vietinghoff's XXXVI. Armeekorps (mot.), together with 10. Panzer-Division and SS-Division *Reich* – finally crosses the Bug; the lavishly equipped reinforced regiment heads for the southern edge of the rapidly developing Bialystok–Slonim *Kessel*.

5 4–6 July: 10. Infanterie-Division (mot.) moves out from Bobruisk to the south-east, its orders to clear troops from the southern flank of XXIV. Armeekorps (mot.) and seize the river crossing at Zhlobin. The division runs straight into the advancing Soviet battle group led by Colonel Spyridon S. Chernyugov; the Soviets are forced back across the river with heavy losses, but they destroy the bridges at Zhlobin as they go.

6 10–11 July: Panzergruppe 2 forces its way across the Dnieper to the north and south of the Soviet stronghold of Mogilev, with 29. Infanterie-Division (mot.) at Kopys, *Großdeutschland* at Shklov and 10. Infanterie-Division (mot.) at Bykhov.

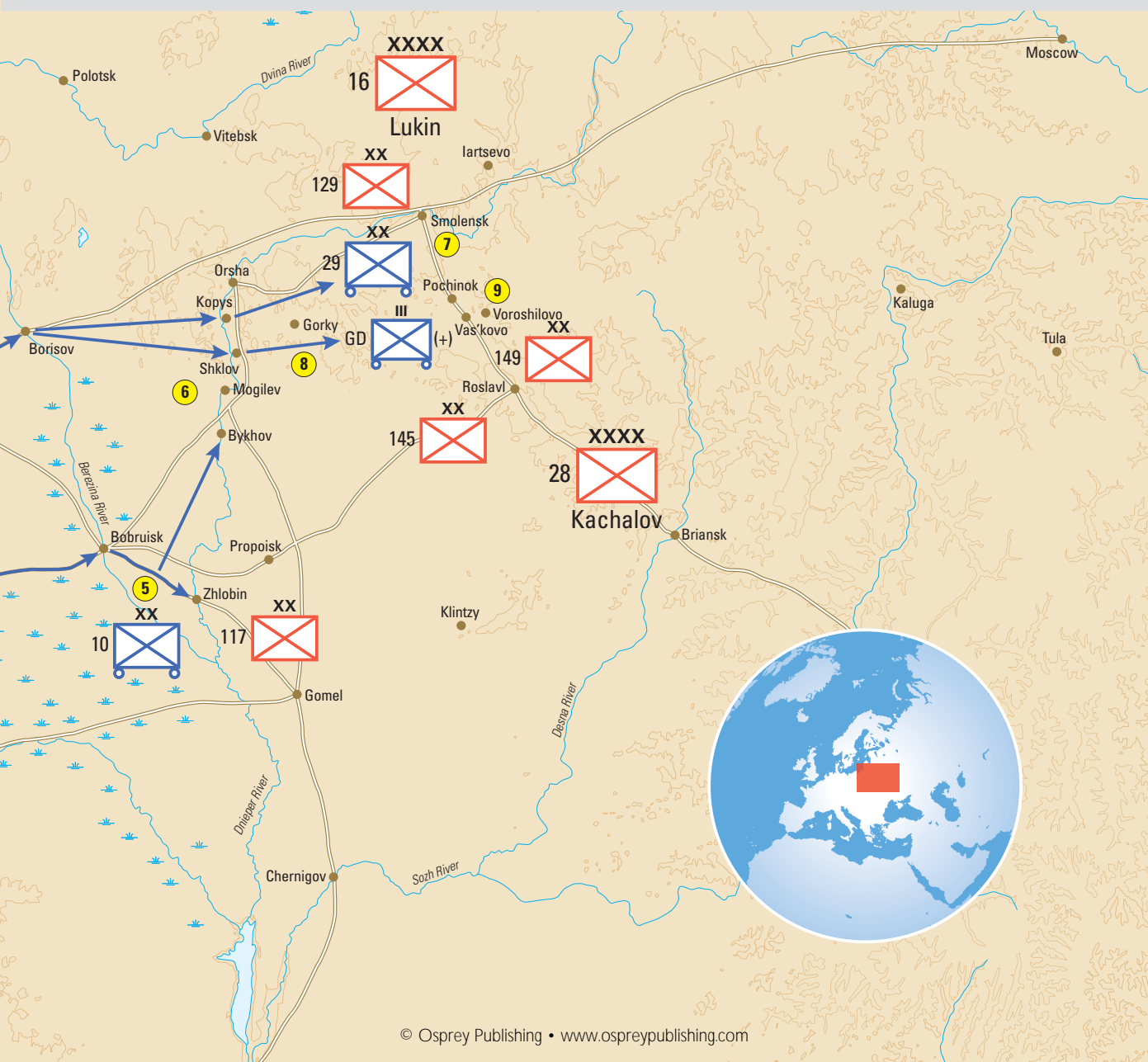


7 15–23 July: 29. Infanterie-Division (mot.) penetrates the southern half of Smolensk on 15 July and on the following day storms across the Dnieper to wrest the northern half of the city from Lieutenant-General Mikhail F. Lukin's 16th Army. This German success is immediately challenged by Soviet counter-attacks that pin 29. Infanterie-Division (mot.) in the city, forcing it to fight a vicious and costly urban battle.

8 17–21 July: *Großdeutschland* moves out from Gorky, its job to keep open the advance road of 10. Panzer-Division (which has been fighting further ahead), as well as to guard the Propoisk–Roslavl road on Panzergruppe 2's southern

flank. The regiment moves into defensive positions around the villages of Vas'kovo and Voroshilovo.

9 23–27 July: Using four newly created armies, Marshal of the Soviet Union Semyon K. Timoshenko launches a huge counter-strike against the German forces that are surrounding Smolensk; regiments from 145th and 149th Rifle divisions (part of Lieutenant-General Vladimir Y. Kachalov's 28th Army) begin a series of unceasing attacks against *Großdeutschland's* positions that set the tone for much of the coming month's fighting. The battle of Smolensk ends in defeat for the RKKA, but for the Wehrmacht, especially the motorized formations, the victory is a Pyrrhic one.



Red Army infantry advance across the open steppe, with some soldiers taking advantage of a lift on the back of a passing T-34. Despite lacking the superficial glamour of that organization's mechanized forces or the raw power of its artillery, the ordinary riflemen of the RKKA – under-equipped, over-stretched and in most cases tactically over-matched – would make the difference in checking the fast-moving maelstrom of the German advance. Their aggression and reliance on the attack, their stubbornness in defeat, and their willingness to spend lives on a scale that was almost incomprehensible to their opponents, would, by the end of July, confirm for the more astute German observers that the war they were fighting now wasn't the one they started six short weeks earlier. The men who made up these rifle regiments were not rabid Communists hobbled by ideology or semi-savage Slavs incapable of coherent action, as some of their German enemies thought; they were, as all national armies are, a reflection of the breadth and complexities of their homeland, a homeland that the Wehrmacht both underestimated and misunderstood. (From the fonds of the RGAKFD in Krasnogorsk via Stavka)

The Heer's standard divisional light howitzer, a 10.5cm leFH 18 (*leichte Feldhaubitze*, or 'light field howitzer 18') struggles with its limber up a rough Russian slope. For motorized-infantry formations, however, the job of hauling the gun was done by prime movers such as the half-tracked SdKfz 251/4. (Nik Cornish at www.stavka.org.uk)



with reliable weapons, significant mechanized forces (including many modern tanks) and excellent artillery in copious quantities. Even with the benefit of surprise, the German forces would expect to be hard pressed in a fight with such a large and dangerous foe, and yet their plans called for the destruction of all western Soviet armies within six weeks, followed by a series of strategic advances that would take the invaders all the way to the Ural Mountains. Such ambition would seem extraordinarily hubristic if taken without regard to the almost miraculous-seeming series of victories that had brought the Germans to this point.

For Heeresgruppe Mitte the advance on Smolensk was the first strategic objective. The Panzer and motorized-infantry divisions of Guderian's and Hoth's *Panzergruppen* were the key – they had the speed, the flexibility and the striking power to drive deep into the Soviet defences, bypassing strongpoints and wrong-footing the Border armies. The first six weeks of the campaign would see Heeresgruppe Mitte do just that, but would also show the serious, potentially devastating miscalculations that the Wehrmacht had made about the capabilities of their own forces as well as those of their enemy.



The Opposing Sides

ORIGINS AND COMBAT ROLE

German

Generaloberst Hans von Seeckt, commander of Germany's Reichsheer in the wake of World War I, planned to build a force that – massively expanded – would fight in any new conflicts with the understanding and expectation that “tactics depend upon co-operation between arms” and that the next war would be one of “Manoeuvre” (quoted in Westwood 2002: 05). Drawing upon a German tradition of reliance upon speed and overwhelming force to bring the enemy to a decisive, annihilating battle, Seeckt encouraged the development of mobile tactics and weapons systems and an innovative approach to armoured warfare. This was taken far further than he had

A group of motorized *Feldgendarmarie* at rest beside their truck, most probably a Citroën T23 – note the MG 34 on an AA mount. Motorization was a comprehensive process covering every aspect of the division. In comparison a regular infantry division would be reliant upon horsepower, its only significant motorized components being the anti-tank and reconnaissance battalions. All sorts of 2- to 3-tonne vehicles were used for troop transport, most notably the petrol-engine Opel Blitz, but also the diesel-engine Daimler-Benz L3000 A and S models, plus trucks from Ford, Citroën and other manufacturers (through purchase or capture). The trucks gave motorized divisions their mobility, but they were of limited use off-road, and even on-road they suffered excessive wear and tear due to the rough and ready conditions of Soviet infrastructure. (Nik Cornish at www.stavka.org.uk)

