



ROBERT KIRCHUBEL

# OPERATION BARBAROSSA

## THE GERMAN INVASION OF SOVIET RUSSIA

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**ROBERT KIRCHUBEL**

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#### AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book is written to the glory of God. It is meant to be the single-volume operational history of Operation *Barbarossa* for a new generation. I want to express my lasting gratitude to my wife Linda and our three sons for their forbearance during my discussions, reading, writing, wargaming, and vacation detours concerning military history. None of my books would have been as successful without the invaluable assistance of my editing team of Joe Wilson and Gary Komar. Gary provided much of the basic data for many of the new sidebars. Thanks also to the Interlibrary Loan Departments at the libraries of San Joaquin County (California), California State University, Fresno, and Purdue University. Lastly, I appreciate the decade-long support of Osprey, which had faith in an unpublished author, especially the backing of Marcus Cowper, who was "present at the creation" of my Campaign series trilogy and who is the godfather of the present volume. Kate Moore and her team have been a pleasure to work with.

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Front Cover: German troops on the Eastern Front. (akg-images)

Back Cover: Infantry occupy Ltky. (MHI)

Pages 2/3: German tanks entering Rostov. (Topfoto)

Chronology: 1. Soviet soldiers overcome obstacles. (Corbis)

2. 88mm Flak gun in action. (Topfoto)

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# PREFACE

This consolidation includes over 90 percent of the original Campaign trilogy text previously published by Osprey. New material includes updates from recent scholarship, clarifications, additional maps, photographs, graphics plus sidebars to address topics not covered in detail elsewhere. Those familiar with the Campaign series know that Osprey has a successful formula which specifies a book's organization, the length of any given section, and the number of supporting graphics. The need to put a lot of information onto fewer than 100 pages challenges an author to balance all the many components of modern warfare – especially in a gigantic campaign like *Barbarossa*. The present volume, however, allows me to write more expansively. Furthermore, Operation *Barbarossa* and the Nazi–Soviet War in general were among the most politicized and ideologically charged in modern history. Therefore this expanded volume has allowed me to put politics and ideology in their proper and prestigious positions.

Another major objective of this book is to present *Barbarossa* in a more understandable manner for an audience perhaps not comfortable or familiar with it. Unfortunately some of the campaign's features that make it so fascinating to me can make it inaccessible to or unpopular with others: its chaos, complexity,

massive scale, twists and turns, to name just a few. In terms of activity, chronology, geography, personalities, units, and other measures *Barbarossa* experienced constant peaks and valleys which can be hard to follow or make sense of.

Significant combat by major units could be widely separated by time and distance. On the face of it, it may not be easy to see the relationship between events at opposite ends of the calendar or map. Immediately after the German invasion there was no longer a solid frontline running between the Baltic and Black Seas; often gaps of dozens of miles developed with nothing to fill them but a thin cavalry screen or a single division. Likewise, massive casualties during *Barbarossa* make *Band of Brothers* type micro-histories difficult; one would have trouble finding a company of von Kleist's panzer group where more than 50 percent of the men survived the five months from Poland to Rostov.

I have organized this narrative along the lines suggested by the German Federal Military Archives (BA-MA) and Soviet historians. Therefore this narrative is more thematic and less purely chronological. German sources for the new organization are the various *Schlacht- und Gefechtsbezeichnungen* at [www.bundesarchiv.de/findbuecher/ma/.../index.htm](http://www.bundesarchiv.de/findbuecher/ma/.../index.htm) while the Soviet sources are from David Glantz, *Colossus Reborn*, Tables 3.1 and 3.6. With that in mind, I have split *Barbarossa* into four stages rather than the usual three. I have included introductions and summaries for each stage to help tie them together. A key innovation of this volume are the engagement and battle matrices in the Appendix. I encourage the reader to refer to them when reading the corresponding combat narrative.

As I have written before, the book's title is "Operation *Barbarossa*," not "The Soviet Defense of the Motherland." In considerable part this is due to the fact that I speak and read German, therefore any non-English sources I used were in that language rather than Russian. Despite that, however, I believe that I have been true to the historian's responsibility to maintain impartial objectivity and have described events as facts warrant. In about 1980, as a US Army armor officer in Germany, I sat on my tank alongside a country road during a pause in the usual autumn maneuvers (REFORGER – Return of Forces to Germany). An old Ostheer veteran came over to me and struck up a conversation. Describing *Barbarossa*, he said "*Dass war eine Leistung!*" – "That was quite a performance!" While I still agree with him, in the final analysis the Nazi–Soviet War ended clearly as a tremendous Allied victory.

Finally, I am not usually one to make positive references to Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, but I have to agree with his first rule of war: do not march on Moscow.

OPPOSITE PAGE:

*Irresistibly Forward*  
(*Unaufhaltsam vorwärts*) by  
Walter Gotschke (gouache,  
1941). Austrian-born Gotschke  
painted auto-racing scenes  
both before and after World War  
II. He painted advertisements  
for Daimler-Benz until the war  
put a halt to commercial auto  
production. Between July and  
October 1941 he accompanied  
one of Hoepner's panzer  
regiments as a war artist.  
(Library of Congress)

# CHRONOLOGY

## 1940

**June 2** Hitler tells von Rundstedt about Eastern campaign.

**June 18** Halder sets up Eastern Front Study Group.

**July 31** Hitler briefs generals on his intent to invade USSR.

**August 5** Marcks completes his *Operationsentwurf Ost*.

**August 7** OKW completes *Aufbau Ost*.

**October–May 1941** Luftwaffe aerial reconnaissance over the USSR.

**Mid-October** Stalin redirects Soviet main defensive effort from Moscow to the Ukraine.

**November 12–13** Molotov visits Berlin.

**November 28–December 3 and 7** Paulus hosts *Barbarossa* wargames.

**December 5** Hitler approves basic plan in conference with von Brauchitsch and Halder.

**December 17–20** *Barbarossa* logistical wargames.

**December 18** Führer Directive 21 issued.

**December 23–January 13, 1941** Kremlin command conferences and wargames; another shake-up within Soviet High Command.

## 1941

**January 31** *Aufmarschanweisung* published, adds Rumania to *Barbarossa* planning.

**February 20** Göring creates Luftwaffe planning staff for *Barbarossa*.

**March 30** Hitler describes *Barbarossa* to 250 generals as a “struggle of two world views.”

**April 6** German leaders begin Balkans campaign.

**May 23** Soviets call up 1905–18 year-group reservists, establish martial law.

**May 30** Mussolini establishes a corps for action in the USSR although German leaders have not officially told Italy about *Barbarossa*.

**May 25–27** Finnish chief of staff visits OKW.

**June 6** Commissar Order issued.

**June 12** Kriegsmarine begins mining Baltic.

**June 14** Hitler clarifies *Barbarossa* objectives to Wehrmacht leaders: Leningrad, the Ukraine, Donbas, and Caucasus. Moscow is not included.

**June 20** Rumanians first officially briefed on *Barbarossa*.

**June 22** *Barbarossatag*; Soviet Military Districts become Fronts. Churchill makes speech in support of USSR.

**June 22–30** Battle for fortress Brest.

**June 23** Stavka created.

**June 23–25** Boldin’s counterattack at Grodno.

**June 24** LVII Panzer Corps captures Vilnius.

**June 24** First Panzer Group passes through Sixth Army; Kirponos’ counterattacks begin.

**June 24–29** Battle of Raseiniai, XLI Panzer Corps against 12th Mechanized Corps.

**June 24** Japanese Army and Navy leaders decide “not

to intervene in the German-Soviet War for the time being.”

**June 26** LVI Panzer Corps captures Dünaburg bridgehead.

**June 27** Unattributed bombing brings Hungary into war.

**June 28–29** 20th and 18th Panzer Divisions close Minsk Kessel.

**June 29–July 6** Mountain Corps Norway’s first attack across Litsa River.

**June 29** 1st Mountain Division enters L’vov.

**June 30** Hoth and Guderian confer. OKH directs von Bock to advance on Smolensk.

**June 30** Sobennikov replaces Kuznetsov as commander of the Northwest Front.

**July 1** XXXVI Corps and Finns attack at Salla.

**July 2** Operation *Munich* crosses Rumanian border.

**July 2** Emperor Hirohito decides against attacking the Soviet Union and for striking South Asia and the Pacific instead.

**July 3–27** Von Kluge commands Fourth Panzer Army.

**July 4** 3rd Panzer Division captures Dnepr bridge at Rogatchev.

**July 7** 13th Panzer Division reaches Berdichev.

**July 8** 20th Panzer Division captures Dvina bridge at Ulla.

**July 9** Piadyshev takes command of LOG.

**July 9** 14th Panzer Division takes Zithomir.

**July 10** Voroshilov arrives at Northwest Direction; Finns attack in Karelia north of Lake Ladoga.

**July 10** 13th Panzer Division reaches Irpen River, 10 miles from Kiev, rest of III Panzer Corps close behind; Stavka creates Strategic Direction.

**July 12** Stavka orders Timoshenko to organize counterattacks toward Bobruisk and prepare defense of Mogilev.

**July 13** Kirponos begins counterattacks against Zithomir Corridor.

**July 13–17** Mountain Corps Norway’s second attack across Litsa River.

**July 14** 6th Panzer Division achieves bridgehead over the Narva River.

**July 14–18** 11th Army counterattacks against LVI Panzer Corps at Soltsy.

**July 15** 7th Panzer Division captures Yartsevo, isolating Smolensk.

**July 15** 26th Army counterattacks at Kanev into First Panzer Group’s rear.

**July 16** 29th Motorized Division enters Smolensk, completing “loose” encirclement.

**July 17** XI Corps crosses Dniestr River.

**July 17–27** Battle for Mogilev after Soviets frustrate initial German attempts to lever River Dnepr.

**July 19** Führer Directive 33 issued.

**July 20** 10th Panzer Division occupies Yelnia.

**July 21–22** Luftwaffe initiates bombing of Moscow.

**July 21** Hitler visits Army Group North headquarters.

**July 21** Rumanians cross Dnestr; XLVIII Panzer Corps reaches Monastyrishche near Uman.

**July 23** Supplement to Führer Directive 33 issued.

**July 23** Soviet forces counterattack at Monastyrishche.

**July 23–August 7** Timoshenko mounts counteroffensive – Group Kachalov.

**July 24–27** Timoshenko mounts counteroffensive – Groups Kalinin and Khomenko, plus Gorodovikov’s cavalry raid.

**July 27** Seventeenth Army breaks free of Stalin Line, heads for junction with First Panzer Group.

**July 29–31** Timoshenko mounts counteroffensive – Group Maslinnikov.

**July 30** Führer Directive 34 published.

**July 30** Sixth Army’s first direct assault on Kiev.

**July 31** Finns attack in Karelia south of Lake Ladoga.

**August 3** IX Army and XXIV Panzer Corps encircle Roslavl.

**August 3** 16th Panzer and 1st Mountain Divisions link up at Pervomaysk, closing Uman pocket.

- August 5** Stalin relieves Zhukov as chief of staff.
- August 5** German leaders consider battle for Smolensk to be over.
- August 7** 26th Army renews attacks at Kanev.
- August 8** Uman fighting over; Rumanians close on Odessa; Sixth Army's second attack on Kiev.
- August 8–10** German general offensive on Luga River begins.
- August 10** Stavka gives up Dnepr River line.
- August 11** Soviets begin general offensive around Yel'nia.
- August 12** Supplement to Führer Directive 34 issued; 11th, 27th, 34th, 48th Armies attack Sixteenth Army at Staraya Russa.
- August 16** First Rumanian assault on Odessa.
- August 19** XXIV Panzer Corps plus VII and XIII Army Corps capture Gomel.
- August 19** LVI Panzer Corps counterattacks to Staraya Russa.
- August 19** LSSAH takes Kherson; 9th Panzer Division gains bridgehead at Zaporozhe.
- August 20** Seventeenth Army wins Dnepr bridgehead at Kremenchug.
- August 22** Hitler issues *Denkschrift* ending High Command debate.
- August 23** 5th Army retreats behind Dnepr.
- August 24** Sixth Army reaches Desna.
- August 26** LVII Panzer from Army Group Center captures Velikie Luki.
- August 26** XVII Corps takes Chernobyl; Tyulenev replaced.
- August 28** Tallinn falls to XLII Corps.
- August 29** Vyborg taken by Finnish IV Corps.
- August 30** OKH issues order for Kiev Kessel.
- August 31** Red Army abandons right bank of Dnepr.
- September 1** XXXVI Corps and Finns unite at Allakurtti.
- September 2** Von Brauchitsch and Halder visit Army Group North headquarters.
- September 6** Soviets re-occupy Yel'nia. Hitler issues his Directive 35.
- September 7** XIII, XLIII, and XXXV Army Corps capture Chernigov.
- September 7** Sensing impending doom at Kiev, Kirponos requests permission to give up Desna Line.
- September 8** Finns reach Svir River; XXXIX Panzer Corps captures Shlisselburg encircling Leningrad.
- September 8–20** Mountain Corps Norway's third attack across Litsa River.
- September 9** Zhukov arrives in Leningrad; XLI Panzer Corps renews assault toward Krasnogvardeysk.
- September 9** Stalin approves Desna move; von Rundstedt orders Eleventh Army to attack Crimea.
- September 10** Stavka instructs forces before Moscow to transition to defense.
- September 10** Sixth and Second Armies (Army Group Center) link up; 3rd Panzer Division reaches Romny; XLVIII Panzer Corps shifted to Kremenchug.
- September 11** Stalin fires Budenny, Timoshenko becomes commander of Southwest Direction.
- September 12** Von Schobert killed at Berislav.
- September 13** XXIV Panzer Corps takes Lokhvitsa; XLVIII Panzer Corps fighting for Lubny.
- September 14** Amphibious assault on Muhu Island.
- September 14** 3rd and 16th Panzer Divisions link up at Lokhvitsa, completing Kiev encirclement.
- September 15** German forces assault Saaremaa Island.
- September 16** XLI Panzer Corps occupies Strel'nyia, 8th Army cut off from Leningrad.
- September 16** XXIX Corps' final assault on Kiev begins.
- September 17** Stalin permits evacuation of Kiev; von Manstein takes over Eleventh Army.
- September 20** Kirponos killed escaping Kiev.
- September 22** German High Command issues directive on starvation of Leningrad.

- September 23** Soviet 9th and 18th Armies begin Sea of Azov battle.
- September 24** Kiev fighting dies down; LIV Corps begins first assault at Perekop (until 28th).
- September 25** Frontlines around Leningrad essentially solidify for duration of siege.
- September 25** Von Rundstedt orders First Panzer Group to counterattack behind Soviets at Melitopol.
- September 29** Oktyarbrsky suggests to Stalin that Odessa be abandoned.
- September 30 and October 2** Army Group Center begins Operation *Typhoon*.
- October 1** Finnish VII Corps takes Petrozavodsk.
- October 1** First Panzer Group attacks toward Melitopol.
- October 2** Rumanians renew assault on Odessa.
- October 5** Panzer Groups become Panzer Armies.
- October 7** 7th and 10th Panzer Divisions close Viazma Kessel. Beginning of *rasputitsa* and first snowfalls.
- October 7** XIV Panzer Corps and LSSAH meet at Berdyansk and close Melitopol pocket.
- October 8** XLVII Panzer Corps and LIII Army Corps close Bryansk Kessel.
- October 8, 9, and 19** Soviets issue various directives on defense of Moscow.
- October 10** Hoth replaces relieved (“ailing”) von Stülpnagel.
- October 11–16** First battle of Mozhaisk line ends in stalemate. Town of Mozhaisk falls on 19th.
- October 12** Attack of Hiiumaa Island.
- October 13** Kaluga falls to German forces.
- October 14** 1st Panzer Division enters Kalinin.
- October 15** Soviets abandon Odessa at night.
- October 16** XXXIX Panzer Corps begins attack toward Tikhvin.
- October 18** LIV Corps launches second attack at Perekop (through 26th).
- October 21** OKH orders Army Group South to Stalingrad and Maikop.
- October 24** Sixth Army takes Kharkov.
- October 26** Von Leeb visits the Führer’s Headquarters.
- November 8** Tikhvin falls to German forces.
- November 9** Timoshenko briefs Stalin on Rostov attack plan.
- November 12** 52nd Army counterattacks at Volkhov.
- November 13** Halder hosts conference of Ostheer chiefs of staff at Orsha.
- November 14 and 16** Zhukov launches pre-emptive attacks against Army Group Center.
- November 15** Von Bock’s left wing begins Operation *Volga Reservoir*.
- November 15** Finnish Group “F” links up on Kandalaksha axis.
- November 16** Eleventh Army reaches Kerch.
- November 18** Guderian launches final assault south of Moscow.
- November 19** 4th Army launches attack to recapture Tikhvin.
- November 20** III Panzer Corps reaches Rostov.
- November 22** Klin falls to German forces.
- November 25** 17th Panzer Division reaches Kashira – Guderian’s farthest advance.
- November 25** 56th Army launches counterattack at Rostov.
- November 27** Timoshenko counteroffensive opens along entire First Panzer Army salient.
- November 28** Von Kleist orders III Panzer Corps out of Rostov.
- November 30** Von Rundstedt approves retreat to Mius River.
- December 1** Von Rundstedt resigns; von Reichenau named replacement.
- December 2** Hitler visits Army Group and Panzer Army headquarters.
- December 5** Soviets initiate general winter counteroffensive.
- December 6** Finnish II Corps and Group “O” take Medvezh’yegorsk.
- December 7** German forces evacuate Tikhvin.





# INTRODUCTION

*“This is not the Second World War, it is the Great Racial War (grosser Rassenkrieg)”*

Hermann Göring, October, 1942

Nazi Germany’s invasion of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) on June 22, 1941, Operation *Barbarossa*, has no equal in military history. By nearly any measure – numbers of combatants involved, physical scope, hatred, and ruination – the Nazi–Soviet War was immense. It is doubtful whether humankind will ever again see another battlefield with 6 million men, tens of thousands of artillery pieces, armored vehicles, and aircraft arrayed against each other on a single day. Timothy Snyder accurately called *Barbarossa* “...the beginning of a calamity that defies description.”<sup>1</sup>

German Führer Adolf Hitler achieved strategic, operational, and tactical surprise against an amply forewarned Soviet Premier Josef Stalin. Rapacious panzer groups, supported overhead by the Luftwaffe, recorded daily advances of 30 and 40 miles or more. The bulk of the Wehrmacht marched on foot behind, closing off pockets of many hundreds of thousands of Red Army captives. On the campaign’s first days Nazi Propaganda Minister Josef Goebbels demurred at showing the German people maps of the USSR while some Germans wondered if prior to launching *Barbarossa* Hitler had even seen such a map. Significantly, the German people had little enthusiasm for the endeavor.

While the Soviet Union’s immense landmass was obvious to anyone looking at a globe of the earth, the resilience of the Communist government, the toughness of the Red Army soldier and the ultimate wisdom of its leadership’s conduct of the war came as an unexpected shock to the invaders and many observers. Hitler’s initial opinion that Germany need only “kick in the door and the whole rotten structure will come crashing down” was not unreasonable given the collapse of the Tsarist and Provisional governments at the end of the Great War. Additionally the Red Army’s poor performance against Poland in 1919–20, against other opponents prior to 1941, and during the Spanish Civil War gave no indication of its real capabilities. From the very start the vicious border battles demonstrated to the Wehrmacht in the field, if not to its leaders behind

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1 Snyder, *Bloodlands*, p.155.

## PREVIOUS PAGE:

Japanese ambassador to Berlin Lieutenant General Baron Oshima Hiroshi. In late August he accompanied Hitler and Mussolini to Uman, probably where this photograph was taken. Oshima visited the Russian theater often and his reports back to Tokyo were intercepted by the UK and US intelligence analysts, providing a wealth of information for most of the four-year war. (Nik Cornish at [www.Stavka.org.uk](http://www.Stavka.org.uk))

Within hours of the German invasion opening, American political cartoonist Theodor Geissel ("Dr Seuss") recognized that the war in the East would be a far different matter from Hitler's earlier invasions. Note that Italy is portrayed in the middle of the Führer's wall of trophies as a road-kill skunk. (Ralph Ingersoll Collection)

the front, that *Barbarossa* would not be as easy as previous campaigns. Many Soviet soldiers, cut off behind the advancing enemy in huge encirclements did not give up but either fought to the death or joined civilians to form partisan bands. By the time the first freezing weather hit in October, the Wehrmacht was greatly weakened and still far from achieving most of its objectives. But the unbroken string of massive encirclement victories up to that point kept alive the German High Command's hubris that allowed them to think they would succeed and later continued well into the autumn to convince them that they could ultimately win the war.

While Hitler and many in his professional military staff had a rosy view of the invasion's projected results many top Germans had their doubts. To those on the scene in 1941, *Barbarossa's* ultimate outcome was far from clear at any point prior to December. The Wehrmacht's blitzkrieg – the combination of flexible mission-style orders, mechanization, airpower, and communications – won victory after victory. Each blitzkrieg segment was purposefully very brief since that was the only type of war Germany could ever hope to win. Having vanquished the French, the world's "best army" the year before, Germany had unshakeable confidence in its armed forces bordering on imprudent arrogance.

However, as in 1812, when after each defeat the Tsar's army remained intact, the Soviet military did not exhibit signs of total collapse in 1941. Neither did an alternative to the Communist system present itself. First

Hitler and then Stalin called for a total war of extermination and national survival. Both men put their nations on the horns of dilemma where being party to mass murder was the lesser of two evils. Both wanted and got a war of hate. They exhorted their troops to fight without mercy, to harden themselves and to intimidate their enemies. The loser would be tied to a criminal regime: as the war turned out, the German officer corps would live and die with Hitler and Nazism.





An SdKfz 10 prime mover half-track towing a 37mm PAK through a burning village. The death and destruction of *Barbarossa* rivaled that of the Thirty Years War. (HITM)

Interestingly, only in the two dictators' minds did the political and military strategy of either country coalesce. Both men made the worst miscalculations of their political careers regarding *Barbarossa*: Hitler in thinking he could win, Stalin in thinking he could "trust" Hitler to abide by the terms of their 1939 treaty. The war on the Eastern Front, and, it might be argued, the opening five months which are presented here, sealed the fate of Hitler's Third Reich and determined the outcome of World War II in Europe.

## The Road to *Barbarossa*

Homer's *Iliad* begins and ends on the eve of battle and is centered on Achilles' anger. Likewise, the *Barbarossa* story opens with preparations for the campaign and closes as Stalin initiated his general winter counteroffensive and revolves around Hitler's obsession with exterminating "Jewish-Muscovite Bolshevism."

War between Germans and Russians in 1941 was not pre-ordained. For nearly 150 years, from the end of the Seven Years' War in 1763 until the decade prior to World War I, the two peoples had been at peace. The pinnacle of their cooperation came during the final stages of the wars against Napoleon. In this context, relations during the reign of Wilhelm II (r.1888–1918) can almost be seen as an anomaly. Within a year of the Versailles Treaty, the new Weimar Republic and Soviet Union rediscovered their earlier common interests as codified by the 1922 Rapallo Treaty and 1926 Berlin Treaty. Through March 1934 Hitler even considered accommodation with the USSR. However, during the mid-1930s, the extremes of totalitarianism made continuing this cozy relationship impossible as each dictator consolidated power at home.

# The Barbarossa Campaign





## Germany

S.J. Lewis described *Barbarossa* as “the only war Hitler ever wanted.” Hitler had numerous reasons for launching *Barbarossa*: to carry out threats he had made since writing *Mein Kampf* 20 years earlier, to fulfill expansionist desires of the army, industry, and the bureaucracy as well as to remove any remaining British hope of continental assistance. In the first case, a basic tenet of Nazism, supported by the traditional German elites, held that the vast lands to Germany’s east were its for colonization and economic exploitation. Therefore Hitler attacked the USSR for ideological, strategic, and economic reasons. As if to validate V.I. Lenin’s designation of Fascism as Communism’s main threat, Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf* that the Nazis “have finished with the eternal German striving toward the south and west of Europe and we are now directing our gaze at the lands in the east.” The Führer saw Bolshevism as the most extreme form of “international Jewry” and set forth plans for a New Order in *Mein Kampf* and even more in his second book of 1928.

Although greater Germany was not overpopulated in 1923 when he first began to write *Mein Kampf* or 1941, Hitler sought *Lebensraum* (space to live), a euphemism for exploited human and natural resources combined with radicalized colonial notions reminiscent of Charlemagne’s warrior-farmers.<sup>2</sup> In his vision, Aryan racial superiority plus this *Lebensraum* would then lead to a final showdown with the British Empire and the United States and, ultimately, German world domination (with a little help from Japan and other smaller allies). Just days after taking power, on February 3, 1933, Hitler told skeptical Reichswehr leaders of his desire to rebuild the army and conquer *Lebensraum* in the east. Likewise, on February 28, 1934, he told senior Army and SS leaders that he sought “short, decisive and crushing

During a pause in their advance eastward, men of a panzer unit watch a flight of Ju 87B Stukas land at an improvised airfield. While such an open landscape might be familiar to a Russian or North American, it was psychologically overwhelming to the Germans. (HITM)

2 Unfortunately for Nazi settlement policies, Germans showed no enthusiasm for moving to newly conquered *Lebensraum*, while during the late 1930s Germans living in Central and Eastern Europe returned to Germany in soaring numbers.

actions, first against the west, then to the east.” Introducing the new Four-Year Plan on September 4, 1936, Herman Göring told Germany’s top leaders “the showdown with Russia is inevitable.”

The Führer looked for “accomplices wherever and whenever they could be of use to him.” For the first years of the Third Reich, Hitler tried the expedient of enlisting Poland as a satellite against the USSR. When Warsaw would have none of it, Hitler reversed himself, “temporarily set aside his anti-Bolshevik fixation” and made a bargain with Stalin.<sup>3</sup> For his part, Stalin wanted to prevent the elimination of the world’s only Socialist state by appeasing Hitler much as Britain and France had done before him. Therefore, after years of antagonism, following the initiative of the pragmatic German Foreign Minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, on August 38, 1939, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union shocked most of the world by signing a Nonaggression Pact. Hitler said the pact was “misunderstood by many [Nazi] party members” and had to reassure Italian dictator Benito Mussolini that the agreement was only a temporary move. Almost 19 years to the day after Lenin’s representative in Berlin first suggested that Germany and the USSR divide Poland between them, the two dictatorships indeed partitioned Poland for the fourth time in 200 years. The Führer put his newly purchased freedom of action, represented by this disposable “tactical maneuver,” to good use, crushing all opposition in non-Russian Europe in the months prior to *Barbarossa* – all with the Soviet leader’s tacit approval.

Since Britain believed Stalin’s purges had fatally weakened the Red Army it depended on a strong Poland to Germany’s east. The Nazi–Soviet Pact so stunned Britain that it would not fight for Poland’s existence one week later (although it did declare war on Germany). Abandoned by east and west, bordered on three sides by the Reich and outclassed in every military category, Poland fell to German arms at the Bzura River after just two weeks. With Britain and its allies still in shock, Hitler moved quickly and in April 1940 overran Denmark in a matter of hours and after a tense struggle prevailed in Norway, basically in the Royal Navy’s backyard. The world was in for an even bigger shock the following month when Hitler invaded France and the Low Countries. British and French moves played right into the German leadership’s hands, but Hitler’s trepidation saved the former from real disaster by allowing the men of the British Expeditionary Force to escape destruction at Dunkirk.

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3 Muller and Ueberschar, *Hitler’s War*, pp.9–11.



When, less than a month after France's capitulation, on July 19, 1940, the United Kingdom rebuffed the Führer's half-hearted peace offer (actually an arrogant "call to reason"), Hitler just as half-heartedly began the Battle of Britain. He cared little for this project, nor were the Luftwaffe or Kriegsmarine anywhere close to ready for a complex cross-Channel invasion. General of Artillery Alfred Jodl, Operations Chief of Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW, Supreme High Command of the German Armed Forces) admitted that English "stoic equanimity" would carry them through the bombing and that there was no indication that German bombardment would cause their collapse.

Hitler soon lost sight for the main reason for the aerial assault, to prime Great Britain for invasion, while aerial and naval realities caused constant delays in Operation *Sealion*, so by mid-winter the continued aerial assault represented mainly a convenient cover story for *Barbarossa's* preparations.<sup>4</sup> As Germany was even less capable of bringing her military forces to bear on the United States, the Führer settled on attacking the Soviet Union as the best way to defeat the Anglo-American maritime powers; in reality all three enemies were physically invulnerable to Nazi Germany.

Indeed, even before the height of the Battle of Britain, Hitler had instructed the Wehrmacht to plan for an invasion of the USSR. The first inkling most senior Wehrmacht, Army, and Navy leaders had of his intentions came at a secret meeting at the Berghof on July 31.<sup>5</sup> To his thinking, with the Red Army emasculated by Stalin's purges and with Russia's resources at his disposal, the Reich would be America's equal. Although the majority would eventually toe the line, almost to a man Germany's senior military leadership initially counseled Hitler against attacking. This was especially true in Jodl's staff, which

A German machine-gun crew silhouetted against the eastern sky. The man in front has an MG34 while his comrades lug ammo cans, spare barrels, etc. Imagine marching and fighting across 1,000 miles over five months, carrying your entire life on your back. (Nik Cornish at [www.Stavka.org.uk](http://www.Stavka.org.uk))

4 Thanks to Bletchley Park intercepts, by mid-January 1941 the British concluded that the Wehrmacht had already cancelled *Sealion*.

5 Presumably Luftwaffe leaders were busy with the air war against Britain.

raised “a chorus of objections.” Göring’s subsequent opposition must have been the harshest blow: Hitler told the Reichsmarschall, “Why don’t you stop trying to persuade me to drop my plans for Russia. I’ve made up my mind.”

Hitler thought that Britain required “one more demonstration of our military might” to acknowledge German dominance of the continent. Likewise, he made fuzzy linkages between the “Jewish Anglo-Saxon warmongers” and the “Jewish rulers of Bolshevik-Muscovite Russia.” Both factors combined to push Hitler toward a violent confrontation with the Soviet Union. Thanks to their commercial treaty of February 1940, however, Stalin was able to control the flow of certain raw materials important to Germany’s war effort.<sup>6</sup> By the summer of 1940 a dangerous situation had developed: the USSR’s industries required many of the same commodities for the Red Army’s rearmament program that Germany did. Hitler could not force Stalin to act as Germany’s long-term supplier and it was against this background that the slide toward *Barbarossa* accelerated.

The final straw came in November, 1940: first, Franklin D. Roosevelt won re-election as US President, thus ruling out American isolationism for much longer; and then Soviet Foreign Minister V.M. Molotov paid a return visit to Berlin. Any pretense of long-term Nazi–Soviet cooperation vanished. Molotov, initially wanting to continue appeasing Germany, attempted to talk specifics, but Hitler tried vaguely to redirect the USSR. It was an open secret in the capital that Hitler expected to score a diplomatic coup: he would offer Stalin a free hand against the British Southwest Asian possessions in exchange for German dominance of Central and Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean. Molotov, however, had no intention of accepting Hitler’s plans and came to Berlin with his own agenda, even resurrecting Soviet interests in Finland.

At this point Nazi–Soviet relations hit rock bottom as Molotov flexed Soviet economic muscle and Hitler sensed impending blackmail. Historians have linked the Führer’s final decision to launch *Barbarossa* with Molotov’s visit. Hitler needed to decide once and for all if Stalin’s wider aims clashed or coincided with his own. In fact he considered the talks with Molotov a charade, simultaneously telling his staff that “preparations for the East are to be continued.”

Hitler believed that continuing British resistance had emboldened the USSR and, enraged by this rebuff, formalized the plans for Operation

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<sup>6</sup> Since mid-1940 the United States had been doing exactly the same thing to Japan.

*Barbarossa* within a month of Molotov's departure. In early January 1941 Nazi economists told Hitler that Russian resources "...would liberate us from every economic worry." For his part, Stalin no longer harbored any illusions about the ultimate future relationship with Nazi Germany, although he disastrously underestimated the imminence of the threat.

After nearly two decades of Nazi ranting about a Jewish-Bolshevik conspiracy and making demands for Lebensraum, with an overheated German economy constantly threatening a domestic crisis in addition to the growing impossibility of an invasion of Britain, Hitler signed the *Barbarossa* directive on December 18.

In the spring of 1941 he put his personal imprint on the character of the impending Eastern campaign with three policy documents which highlighted the central racial-political foundation of *Barbarossa*.

The first was the March 13, 1941 publication of an annex to the operations order in which Hitler rejected army administration of occupied areas, instead turning these duties over to Nazi Party and police organs. Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler received "special tasks," including the creation of *Einsatzgruppen*, Special Task Forces, that would follow the army to round-up and murder Jews, Communists, and other enemies of the *Volk*, or German people. Hitler augmented this annex on May 13 with his Decree on Military Justice, relieving military commanders of responsibility for prosecuting their own soldiers as war criminals; and again on June 6, with the better-known Commissar Order. These documents can be considered the beginning of a second Nazi revolution: henceforth Germany's conduct of the war took on a new and darker complexion.

Two other Nazi programs also require mention here. One is the short-term Hunger Plan overseen by Göring, meant to starve "many tens of millions" of Slavs and Jews in order to feed Germans. The other is Himmler's *Generalplan Ost* (General Plan East) a long-term (c.30 year) plan to colonize Central and Eastern Europe and exterminate or expel many, if not most indigenous peoples. Anyone who minimizes or ignores the connection between *Barbarossa* and Nazi racial eliminationist policy misses Hitler's primary reason for prosecuting World War II.



A firing squad shoots Soviet citizens into a half-full mass grave. Murder was part and parcel of German occupation policies, especially in the east. Contrary to the myth of the Nazis' "industrialized killing," most of their killing was done like this: up close and personal. (From the fonds of the RGAKFD in Krasnogorsk via Stavka)

The Führer famously told the Reichstag on the sixth anniversary of the Nazis' ascension to power, January 30, 1939, and repeated many times afterward, "If the international Jewish financiers ... again succeed in plunging the nations into a world war the result will be ... the annihilation of the Jewish race throughout Europe." Operation *Barbarossa* is where Nazi expansionism and anti-Semitism converged. Taken together with these general occupation practices and its brutal treatment of Soviet POWs (an army responsibility), the spring of 1941 marks the date when Germany began to sink irretrievably toward Auschwitz.

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By the summer of 1941 all of continental Europe, with the exception of the USSR, was Axis, Axis-occupied, or neutral (and in many cases leaning toward Germany). Between the outbreak of war in 1939 and June 1941 the weaknesses and failings of its opponents had concealed the shortcomings of Germany's own military forces. The assumption, validated in previous campaigns, was that blitzkrieg would only face an enemy's forces in being and that no opportunity would be given for the enemy to recover or rebuild. Nazi domestic authority and German victories preceding *Barbarossa*, all attributed to Hitler's genius, undermined any lingering German military opposition to the dictator. With his military and political position assured, *Barbarossa* was carried out according to the Führer's wishes.

### **The Soviet Union**

According to the Soviet interpretation of the Great War's beginnings, Russia had been tricked into attacking Imperial Germany in support of the Western Capitalists and had come out the big loser in 1918. Optimally Stalin would join any subsequent war only after comprehensive peacetime preparations and on his own terms. This meant waiting out the "self-laceration of Capitalism and its Fascist afterbirth" on the Western Front. But Germany's lightning victory in the spring of 1940 wrecked that hope.

In 1939 Stalin's primary concern remained establishing "socialism in one country." He strengthened the USSR by expanding the military and by ruthlessly and brutally developing Soviet industry with successive Five-Year Plans (the USSR was in the midst of the third plan in 1941). He created an entirely new resource and industrial base deep in the Ural region beyond the range of any potential enemy. Output of numerous strategic materials was only slightly higher than Germany's, but the Soviet growth rate was much greater.



In June 1941 the USSR was militarily relatively weaker but politically much stronger than its Tsarist predecessor had been in August 1914. Granted, Stalin's ruthless purges had decapitated its military in 1937–38, the Five-Year Plans were losing momentum, and by 1941 any potential continental allies had succumbed to the German steamroller. However, paramilitary organizations had trained over 13,000,000 snipers, radiotelephone operators, horsemen, vehicle drivers, pilots, and parachutists. The Red Army grew to 5,000,000 men by the eve of *Barbarossa*. Significantly, the efforts of the Second and Third Five-Year Plans, which focused on heavy industry, were concentrated in the eastern regions of the USSR so that by 1940 37 percent of its steel, 35 percent of its coal, and 25 percent of its energy production came from areas the German forces never reached.

In the summer of 1939 Stalin went along with Hitler's Nonaggression Pact. Britain and France had sacrificed Czechoslovakia the year before to buy a few months' peace; the USSR sacrificed Poland for the same purpose. The Soviet leader's opinion of the pact was little different from Hitler's; indeed Stalin admitted at the Yalta Conference that the pact was "not serious." While one of Hitler's intentions was that the pact should spread distrust and chaos among his enemies, Stalin sought time and stability to continue his vast restructuring of the Soviet Union. Ruthlessly consolidating

A hopeful prewar Soviet poster boasts "The borders of the USSR protect all the Soviet people." Even after the Wehrmacht had overrun most of Europe the blitzkrieg's violence came as a shock to the USSR. (NARA)

Soviet riflemen in hasty defensive positions. In one of the infrequent examples of good German intelligence they anticipated Soviet defensive capabilities, but even this did not prepare them for *Barbarossa's* harsh realities. (NARA)



power, Stalin purged some 25,000 officers from his military during the 1930s. Over 8,000,000 Soviet citizens were in jail at any one time from 1937–53, and of those 1,000,000 died each year. Stalin took his final step to power on May 5, 1941 when he added the title of Soviet Premier to that of Communist Party Chairman.

In line with the secret protocols of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Nonaggression Pact of September 23, 1939 and exploiting Germany's distraction with war in the west, Stalin diddled behind Hitler's back and occupied Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Rumanian Bessarabia as part of the "Expansion of the Fraternal Family of Soviet Nations." In this instance, as well as at Khalkin Gol in 1939, in the occupation of eastern Poland in September 1939, and in his war against Finland in the winter of 1939–40, Stalin showed no hesitation in using the Soviet military. He levered economic power as well and, in seeking commercial arrangements with Stalin to circumvent the British naval blockade, Hitler became dependent on a very dangerous business partner. Stalin knew Hitler could not field his huge army without Soviet resources.

Therefore by late 1939 and throughout 1940, Soviet aggression matched that of Germany. Commenting in his diary, Goebbels wrote, "That's our price for Russia's neutrality." The Western Allies saw Stalin as Hitler's willing partner, so they helped Finland fight against the USSR and contemplated a treaty with Turkey over the Straights. After the fall of France, Britain put its



A 37mm Pak 36 and crew crushed by Soviet tanks. Although still used in large numbers during *Barbarossa*, 37mm guns were practically useless against Soviet tanks, especially at the long ranges common in the USSR. (NARA)

own far-fetched schemes into high gear by sending Royal Navy squadrons and submarines into the Black Sea, violating Soviet airspace with reconnaissance aircraft and making plans to bomb Caucasus and Baku oil facilities from Iraq (plans they would dust off in 1942 as the German forces neared both places). All these moves only made Stalin more mistrustful of the British as *Barbarossatag* (*Barbarossa* Day) approached.

Red Army failings during the 1939–40 Winter War were legion and only by applying overwhelming violence and numbers did the USSR finally prevail. While Hitler's war machine swept all before it, Soviet weaknesses were an embarrassment. With Stalin's moves in eastern Poland, Finland, and the Baltic States the Red Army's frontlines were shorter, requiring fewer units to garrison them. Yet the Red Army largely squandered the advantages of this buffer zone by abandoning its fortifications 200–400 miles behind it and through its imprudent forward deployment. This surge westward also created distance from its already-inadequate logistical support and demonstrated the Stalinist military dilettantism that plagued Soviet operations well into *Barbarossa*.

On the eve of war with Germany, the Soviet military was not in good shape. Like Mussolini's military, the Red Army had modernized too early, and by 1941 much of its equipment was effectively obsolete. In the early 1930s the Red Army had been at the forefront of mechanized warfare doctrine but nearly a decade later its attitudes were reactionary. During the Great Purge Stalin

arrested and tried 9,506 army and air force officers (most were executed) and expelled a further 14,684 from service (although subsequently he reinstated many). The purges hit the higher ranks worst. The victims also tended to be the most experienced and farsighted of the Red Army's officer corps. The continuing executions and imprisonment plus political interference from the commissars undermined the morale of the remnants. The lessons of Germany's blitzkrieg victories were not effectively digested and applied to the Red Army while fear of provoking Hitler further limited corrective action.

Meanwhile, Stalin appeared to be blissfully ignorant of the impending war. His first foray into military leadership, as a top political officer in the Ukraine during the young Soviet Union's 1920 defeat by Poland, had ended in failure. The undisputed fount of all domestic and foreign policy and military decision-making (indeed much like Churchill and Roosevelt), he was not the first world leader to misjudge Hitler. Within the Soviet hierarchy he had many equally unprepared accomplices in state, party, diplomatic, and military circles. However, his much criticized signing of the Nonaggression Pact with Hitler in 1939 and the Economic Accord the following January kept the USSR out of the pan-European war for nearly two years. The Neutrality Pact negotiated with Japan on April 13, 1940 was equally significant. While the Soviet High Command had to keep a wary eye on the 39 divisions, 1,200 tanks, and 2,500 aircraft of Japan's Kwantung Army in Manchuria during the first half of *Barbarossa*, Stalin's staff could be reasonably sure that they only had to plan for a one-front war.

The key issue is not whether the USSR noticed Nazi preparations, but what it did with information received. Soviet generals informed Stalin of Hitler's July 31, 1940 meeting within days. Soviet rail passengers traveling through occupied Poland could not but see and report the massive military buildup. Numerous Luftwaffe reconnaissance aircraft crashed inside the USSR, their camera films full of photos of Soviet military facilities. Stalin's diplomats and spies, the British and others flooded Soviet intelligence agencies with detailed information of Germany's ongoing preparations. Like the Germans, the Soviet leaders had a long time to prepare for *Barbarossa*.

Stalin made three critical errors of judgment that led directly to his nation's strategic, operational, and tactical surprise: 1) he believed that Germany was too dependent on Soviet resources to attack; 2) he was further convinced that Hitler would not attack while the Anglo-American maritime powers remained intact on Germany's Atlantic flank; and 3) he thought that any invasion would be preceded by an ultimatum as had occurred with Czechoslovakia and Poland

and indeed at the beginning of World War I. Nazi Germany had its *Führerprinzip*<sup>7</sup> and the USSR its cult of personality. Institutional forces in each country and their respective philosophies contributed directly to the nature of *Barbarossa*.

On the day before the invasion, People's Commissar for Internal Affairs L.P. Beria wrote to Stalin, agreeing with his master that, "Hitler is not going to attack us in 1941." Although Stalin was surprised by the timing, the axis of the main attacks, and the ferocity of *Barbarossa*, in fact he had in all probability expected an eventual German invasion. By signing the pact with Hitler, by providing Germany with natural resources and strategic materials, and by sacrificing much of Central and Eastern Europe, Stalin hoped to improve the USSR's position before war between the two states erupted. As N.I. Khrushchev pointed out in 1956, this was a near-fatal assumption. Approximately half an hour after German preparatory air and artillery fire began General G.K. Zhukov called the dictator with news of the attack. He asked "Did you understand what I said, Comrade Stalin?" Silence. "Comrade Stalin, do you understand?" At last Stalin understood.

## German Operational Developments

Operational planning is where strategic intent would be translated into orders executed at the army group and army levels. It is therefore appropriate to look in detail at the three subordinate theatres of *Barbarossa*'s main front:

### Army Group North

The battlefields portrayed here long possessed military significance for the Germans and the peoples of Eastern Europe. Here the Teutonic Knights sought to Christianize the heathen via the edge of the sword, the Prussians under David von Yorck abandoned Napoleon to join Tsar Alexander, and the Freikorps battled Bolsheviks after World War I. Finland represented a prize historically coveted by both Sweden and Russia.

Army Group North's Field Marshal Wilhelm *Ritter* von Leeb had not been tested in either the German conquest of Poland in 1939 or the assault on France and the Low Countries a year later. He had neither led panzer formations nor worked with his senior commanders prior to June 1941. While Army Group North's operational area might be the smallest of those assigned to the three German army groups, so were its forces. The terrain between East Prussia and Leningrad was some of the worst encountered by

7 This refers to the German doctrine that the Führer's word was absolute and that ultimate responsibility lay with him.

# The Eve of *Barbarossa* – Army Group North



- Luftflotte Headquarters
- Initial German positions
- German Airfields
- German Auxiliary Airfields
- Soviet Headquarters Air Division
- Initial Soviet positions
- Stalin Line & Soviet defenses
- WWI German & pre-1939 Polish defenses
- Soviet Airbase 1st Class
- Soviet Airbase 2nd and 3rd Class





the Ostheer (the German Army in the East), and possessed a transportation infrastructure that was at best primitive. Army Group North's primary objective, Leningrad – a city of 3,000,000 souls – had ideological and economic significance for both sides. However, at no time did Hitler provide von Leeb with the resources necessary to conquer it.

In the extreme north, German *Gebirgsjäger* (mountain troops) battled futilely toward Murmansk across frozen tundra. Both climate and terrain in this region were alien to the German forces, earning them the thinly disguised contempt of their Finnish allies and Soviet enemies alike. Disjointed Axis command and control created numerous liabilities; von Leeb's main front fell under the Oberkommando des Heeres (OKH, or Army High Command), Finnish Marshal Carl Mannerheim commanded his country's effort northwest of Leningrad, while the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW, or Armed Forces High Command) controlled Axis operations near the Arctic Circle. To compound German problems, Finland's military ambitions did not really extend beyond regaining territory lost to the Soviet Union in 1939–40; Mannerheim proved unwilling to cross much beyond the 1939 boundary in order to link up with von Leeb. German logistics, intended for a brief blitzkrieg, naturally failed in a sustained war of attrition.

Soviet arrangements were not markedly better. At the highest level, the Northwest Front suffered from weak leadership; its commander, Lieutenant General F.I. Kuznetsov, proved completely incapable. His successor, Marshal K.E. Voroshilov, demonstrated heroic leadership, but poor managerial skills. As with all Red Army forces on June 22, the Northwest Front defended exposed and ill-prepared positions; the relative security of the Stalin Line defenses had been left behind during the Soviet land-grab of 1939–40.

The Northern Front under Lieutenant General M.M. Popov, guarding Leningrad and the Finnish border, gave a better account of itself. Popov exploited Finland's limited war aims around Leningrad and allowed a skillful subordinate, Lieutenant General V.A. Frolov, to frustrate the Axis in the far north.

After the shock of the campaign's first few days wore off, Luftwaffe elements enforced their will on the Soviet forces only with substantial reinforcement, and the size of the Finnish area of operations dissipated the small Luftwaffe effort there. Throughout *Barbarossa* German soldiers repeatedly shot at their Luftwaffe comrades because they saw German aircraft so seldom that they assumed any aircraft to be Soviet. On the other hand, the Red Army Air Force soon recovered to represent a persistent threat to the invaders. At sea the large and prestigious Red Banner Baltic Fleet remained

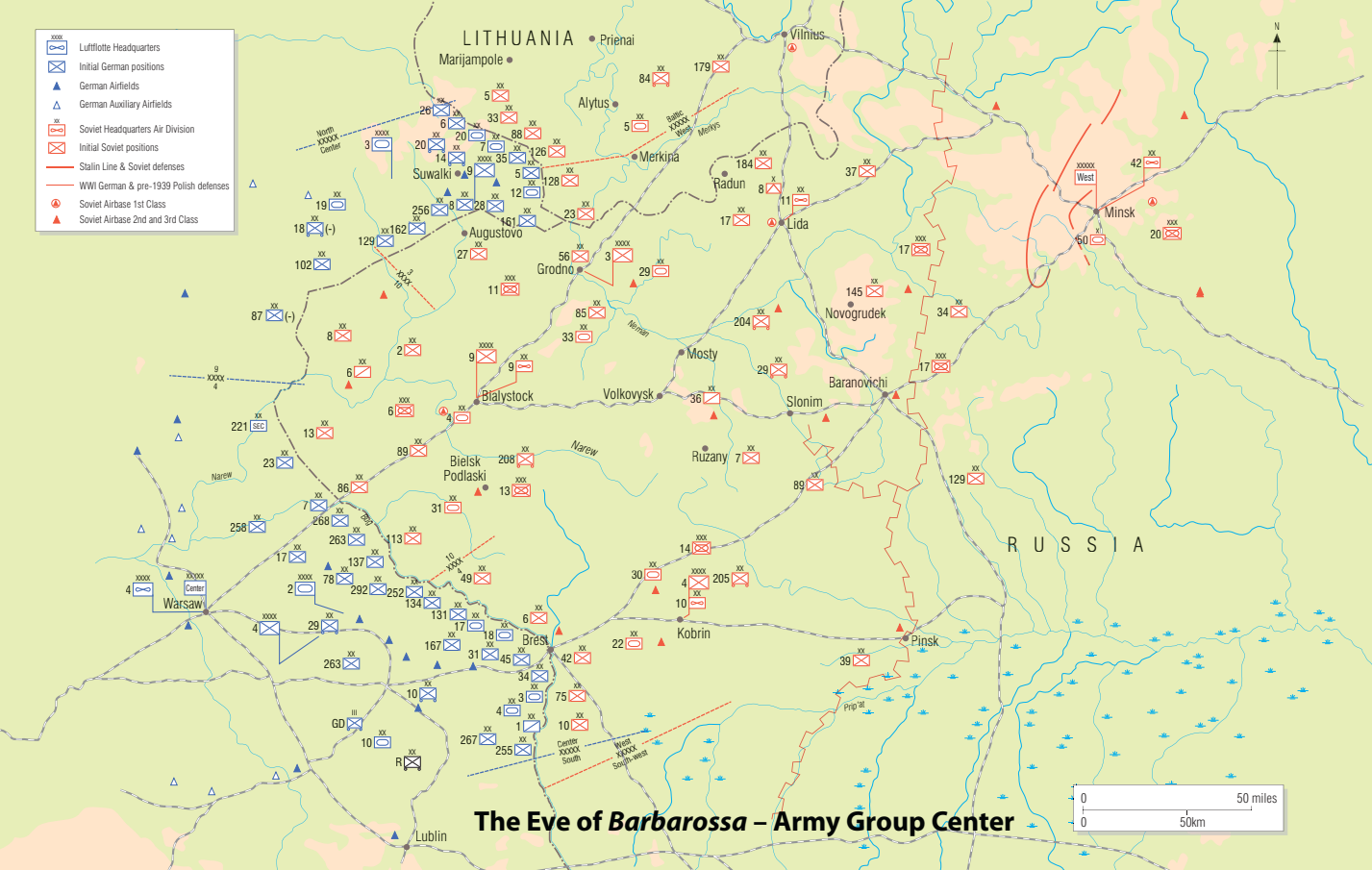


passive against the relatively small Kriegsmarine and Finnish naval elements in the Baltic Sea. However, Soviet Northern Fleet elements constantly harassed the German forces in the Arctic Ocean and its littoral.

### **Army Group Center**

The Nazis' decisions concerning Moscow are among the most hotly debated aspects of World War II. Stalin's capital never figured prominently in Hitler's concept of *Barbarossa*. It was not an initial objective; that prestige went to destroying the bulk of the Red Army west of the Dvina and Dnepr. Neither was Moscow the ultimate geographic objective of the invasion, which was the Archangel–Astrakhan line. After all, the Wehrmacht had essentially defeated both Poland and France before either Warsaw or Paris had fallen; the capture of the capital cities merely represented political formalities. Clearly, many German generals thought differently, principal among them being Army Chief of Staff Colonel General Franz Halder. Below the Führer and Halder stood operational leaders of armies and corps who, with their soldiers on the ground, simply wanted clear and firm guidance from above.

Two columns of troops with entirely different fates. On the left, walking toward the camera, are Germans on their way to the front. On the right, walking away, are Soviets on their way to captivity. (Nik Cornish at [www.Stavka.org.uk](http://www.Stavka.org.uk))



Field Marshal Fedor von Bock would lead Army Group Center, the *Schwerpunkt* or decisive element of the *Barbarossa* plan, toward Moscow. The German forces attacked generally along the relative high ground that divided the watersheds of the Dvina and Dnepr rivers – the same route followed by Napoleon in his fateful 1812 invasion. Von Bock had proved himself in Germany’s earlier blitzkrieg campaigns, and was well resourced; his command comprised the Fourth and Ninth Armies and two armored groups, plus the Luftwaffe’s premier close air support (CAS) formation.

After Stalin’s central European land grab in 1939–40, the Red Army in Poland stood closer to Berlin than to Moscow. However, the bulk of the Western Special Military District (WSMD – “Special” meaning that it could supposedly fight without substantial reinforcement) occupied dangerously exposed positions in the Bialystok salient between East Prussia and occupied southern Poland. Since the acquisition of these territories had represented the high point of Soviet interwar foreign policy, Stalin insisted that Colonel General D.G. Pavlov, commanding WSMD, fight hard to keep them. One of the few Soviet veterans of the Spanish Civil War to survive Stalin’s purges, Pavlov’s command was a secondary front, since the dictator expected the

German forces' main blow to fall in the Ukraine. Von Bock outclassed Pavlov in every way, and, although Bolshevik theorists had predicted the Second Imperialist War since the days of Lenin, the unleashing of *Barbarossa* achieved total surprise against Pavlov, as against his fellow commanders elsewhere.

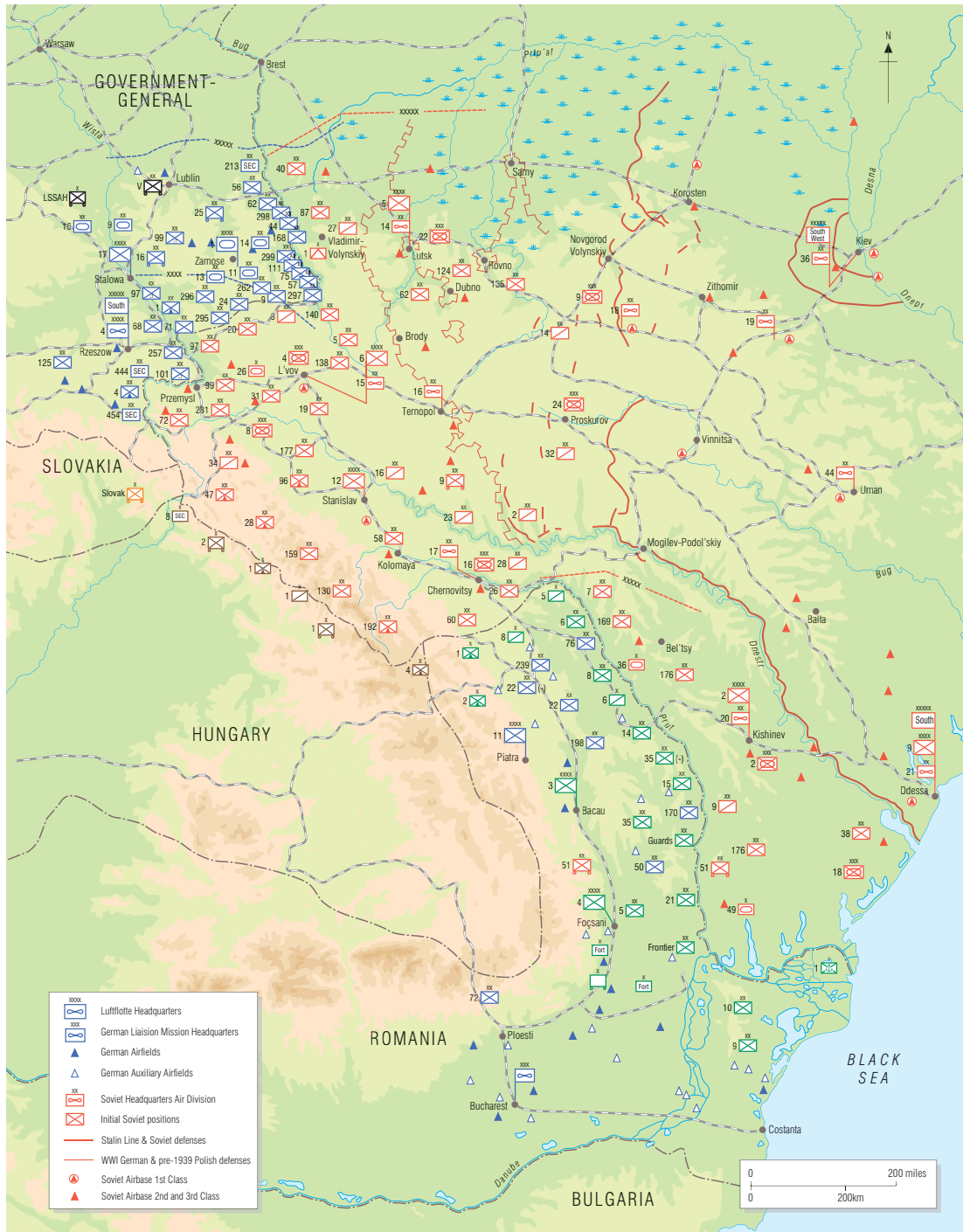
### **Army Group South**

At 0100hrs on Sunday, June 22, 1941 Army Group South issued codeword "Wotan," indicating *Barbarossa* would begin as planned in little more than two hours. The German Army's senior officer, Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, commanded 55 divisions plus numerous brigades and other smaller units along a front of more than 800 miles. His headquarters, under Chief of Staff General of Infantry Georg von Sodenstern, had proved itself in France. Von Rundstedt managed the Reich's version of coalition warfare, with Hungarian, Italian, Rumanian and Slovakian formations under command. With the largest operational area of any army group, yet only one panzer group, his men had four difficult tasks: 1) destroying Red Army units to their front; 2) capturing the Ukrainian capital of Kiev and the Dnepr River crossings; 3) seizing the Donets Basin (Donbas); and 4) opening the route to the Caucasus oil region. Of the three army groups, von Rundstedt's came closest to accomplishing its assigned missions.

Facing Army Group South were the Kiev Special Military District and Odessa Military District, which at the start of the war became the Southwest and Southern Fronts respectively. Commanded by Lieutenant General M.P. Kirponos, the Southwest Front especially was well led, and had some of the Red Army's best equipment and other benefits accrued from Stalin's belief that the south would be the Germans' main theater. Along the Black Sea coast Lieutenant General I.V. Tyulenev commanded the new Southern Front (originally the 9th Independent Army). Taking liberties with Stalin's orders not to make provocative gestures prior to June 22, both military districts had coordinated with NKVD Border troops and dispersed their aircraft. Soviet forces under their command offered a more skillful defense of the frontier than did the fronts facing Army Groups North and Center. Counterattacking as Red Army assets allowed and withdrawing to successive defense lines, they put von Rundstedt behind schedule.

Only when robbed of any operational freedom by Stalin's orders did true disaster hit Soviet defenders south of the Rokitno Marshes. Finally, in mid-September, and only with the cooperation of Army Group Center, von Rundstedt's forces achieved dramatic success. In the encirclement at Kiev,

# The Eve of Barbarossa – Army Group South



two-thirds of a million Soviet troops surrendered in history's greatest single military victory. For the first and only time in World War II German forces in the field outnumbered those of the USSR. Stalin's High Command somehow plugged the resulting massive gap and resistance stiffened once again. Meanwhile, Hitler bled off mechanized forces from Army Group South for the attack on Moscow, German logistics foundered in the Ukrainian steppes, weather once more delayed von Rundstedt's advance, and his troops reached the limit of their endurance. By November, the Donets River in the north, temporary possession of Rostov in the center, and the siege lines around Sevastopol in the Crimea represented Army Group South's high water mark. Soon after, the Soviet forces counterattacked along the entire front. By then, however, none of the senior commanders remained in their posts – Hitler had accepted von Rundstedt's resignation, Kirponos died at Kiev, and Tyulenev went to the rear severely wounded. Army Group South's plunge into the great agricultural and industrial El Dorado of the Ukraine would supposedly satisfy all of the Third Reich's desires.

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German myth holds that the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa lies sleeping under Kyffhäuser Mountain in the southern Harz, ready to heed his nation's emergency call. The elderly emperor drowned in 1190 leading the Second Crusade through present-day Turkey. Hitler renamed his eastern crusade from *Otto* to *Barbarossa*, "imparting to it an epic, archaic, even redemptive aura."<sup>8</sup>

The stage was set for history's greatest campaign. Fringe historians continue to perpetuate unsubstantiated rumors that Stalin was preparing for his own pre-emptive attack. The Red Army General Staff naturally had contingency plans for an attack against Germany, but there is no evidence that these had any effect on German planning. As with Hitler's every aggressive act since the fairy-tale wars of the Rhineland, Austria, and Czechoslovakia, *Barbarossa* was purely a war of conquest: however the ending would be radically different.

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8 Hagen, *German History in Modern Times*, p.32.



# OPPOSING PLANS

## German Plans

A bittersweet soldiers' one-liner, equal parts cleverness and accuracy, holds that there are two types of military plans: those that won't work and those that might work. Except in over-determined hindsight, it is difficult to decide into which category *Barbarossa* falls. Flushed with victory after crushing France, Hitler had wanted to invade the USSR in autumn 1940 – an ambition vigorously opposed by his generals. This disagreement, and logistical weakness and delays, convinced Hitler to postpone the assault until the following spring. The dominating role of logistics was underlined on July 21, 1940 when the army commander-in-chief, Field Marshal Walther von Brauchitsch, told Hitler that only 80–100 divisions would be required to subdue the Soviet troops – a number in fact largely dictated by what the Reichsbahn (the German national railroad network) could move and sustain, rather than a realistic estimate of fighting forces needed.

According to international common opinion, shared by Hitler and the Wehrmacht, a war against the USSR would be quick and easy. The German leadership had nearly 11 months to plan *Barbarossa*, much longer than for their earlier campaigns. However, their hard-marching army did not have the capacity simultaneously to penetrate the Soviet lines and to conduct huge encirclements much beyond the frontier – indeed, it is questionable if even a fully-motorized force, like the US Army in 1944–45, could have done what the Wehrmacht expected of the Ostheer in *Barbarossa*. In addition, the Nazi “philosophy” of racial and martial superiority which exaggerated Germany’s prowess while minimizing that of its enemies, combined with insufficient resources and poor staff work, would ensure a difficult campaign.

*Barbarossa's* planning suffered from curious effects harkening back to the German experiences in the east during the Great War. Then, as later, a single division could successfully take on two or three Russian divisions. Still, war in the East had been no easy proposition; in 1915, when the Central Powers made their greatest advance in that theater, losses were 1.25 times greater than those

PREVIOUS PAGE:  
Half-tracks, *Sturmgeschütze*,  
and other vehicles of the LVI  
Panzer Corps in the open terrain  
characteristic of *Barbarossa*'s  
early weeks. Once past the  
Velikaya River von Manstein's  
lightning advances fell foul of  
more difficult terrain. (NARA)

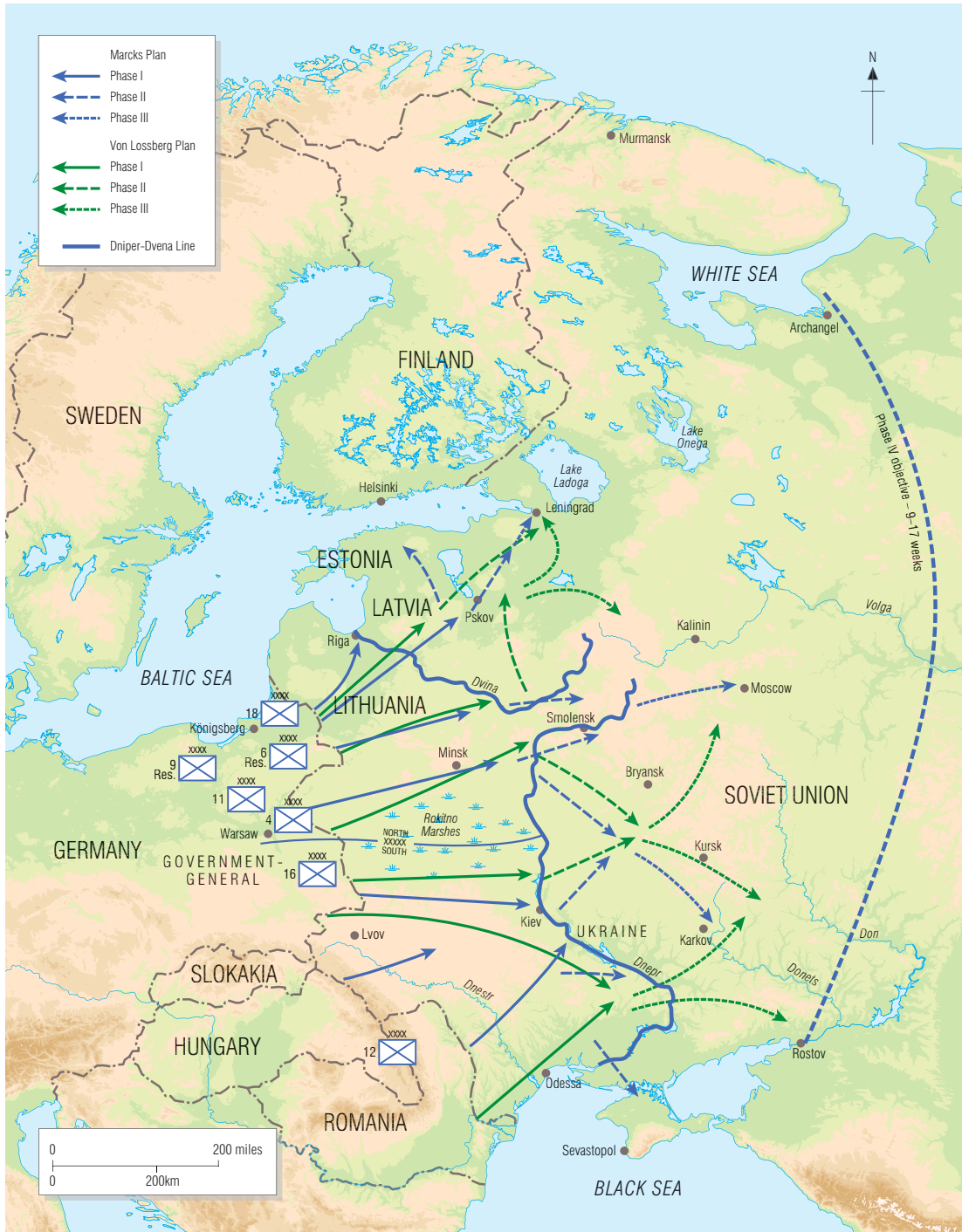
in the West. Although Ludendorff's defensive line ultimately stretched from Finland to the Crimea, the German forces and their Habsburg allies had ample experience with Russian weather and terrain. They knew their own manicured forests were nothing like the common eastern wildernesses (referred to as the *Urwald*). German and Austrian soldiers lived with Russian filth, vermin, disease, and poverty. Ironically, terrible roads and poor communications had been a major cause of Russian failure in 1914–17. Evidently these lessons were lost on Wehrmacht leaders a generation later.<sup>9</sup>

As indications of his confidence in his own military abilities and the importance of the ideological struggle against Communism, Hitler put his mark on *Barbarossa*'s operational details like no previous campaign. Taking into account the Army's and Luftwaffe's short striking ranges, the plan eschewed deep operations and settled on a line formed by the Dvina and Dnepr rivers for its initial goal. As happened in Poland and the West, the Soviet commanders' forward deployment played into the German forces' hands. Writing after the war former Field Marshal Friedrich Paulus recreated the contemporary mood of the German leadership: "tremendous vigor of National Socialist policy, then at its zenith" and "complete confidence born of the victory in the Western campaign." He went on to say that "experts declared [Hitler's] previous victories impossible." The Wehrmacht would again prove them wrong in 1941. While many of Hitler's generals questioned *Barbarossa* as an indirect attack on Britain, they were enthusiastic about building a blockade-proof Reich.

As stated, Hitler began thinking of an Eastern campaign before France had even formally surrendered. Initial planning began with the rushed (four days), poorly researched assessment of the Red Army's strength by Lieutenant Colonel Eberhardt Kinzel's Fremde Heere Ost staff (FHO – Foreign Armies East). German intelligence knew very little about their future enemy despite ten years' efforts. In addition, every Abwehr (counterintelligence) agent in the USSR had been turned. They underestimated the overall size of the Red Army while overestimating the number of units in the western military districts. All subsequent plans were based on the weak cornerstone of Kinzel's inadequate and faulty analysis that the Wehrmacht would take to its grave. This junior officer and his small overworked staff also had responsibility for the armies of Scandinavia, the Balkans, China, Japan, and the United States (Kinzel subsequently committed suicide in 1945). The Gestapo, answerable

9 Among others, the following senior German generals served in Russia during World War I: von Rundstedt, Kesselring, von Manstein, von Mackensen, and Halder.

# German Plans





A Red Army soldier crawls to surrender to a Panzer IV and attendant Landsers. The barn is well built and undamaged, a valuable refuge in the coming winter. (HITM)

for political intelligence, added another layer of inaccuracies by predicting the Soviet state's collapse within weeks. Although just days into *Barbarossa* Hitler began to hedge his bets by saying that he might not have begun the campaign if he had known the real strength of the USSR, it is difficult to see an intelligence estimate (or anything else, for that matter) dissuading him from a campaign he had been anticipating for nearly 20 years.

With the German military focused in the summer of 1940 on the Battle of Britain and Operation *Sealion*, on July 4, 1940 Army Chief of Staff Colonel General Franz Halder put generals Georg K uchler and Erich Marcks to work planning the Eighteenth Army's defense of the East. Their planning turned offensive two weeks later when Hitler told Halder, "*Stalin kokettiert mit England*" (Stalin flirts with England). By the end of July, Marcks' plans neared completion. Following Kinzel he assumed "... the Russians no longer possess the superiority of numbers they had in the World War..." On July 29, he flew to Halder's headquarters in Fontainebleau where the army chief of staff succeeded in shifting Marcks' emphasis from the Ukraine to Moscow. Marcks completed his *Operationsentwurf Ost* (Operational Draft East) on August 5,