

World War II in Europe (1939-1945)

Prelude to the War

When the Germans invaded Poland on 1 September 1939 the world went to war for the second time in 27 years. One country, albeit overtly expansionist in its aims, had simply invaded another, but the omens were not good. Unbelievably, so soon after 'the war that will end war', nations and their leaders had allowed another conflict to threaten the planet. The scope of this new war was not yet apparent, the truth dawning gradually; this one would last six years, involve more than two hundred countries which caused millions of people to suffer, costing 55 million lives and material damage of some 3 billion dollars, it affected the lives of three quarters of the world's population and influence the lives of the majority of the world's inhabitants to some degree. Within months of the German move into Poland much of Europe had been occupied by the rampaging Blitzkrieg techniques of the Third Reich's military forces and everyone, even residents of far distant nations, was 'at war', their resources in men and material committed to the cause, on one side or the other. The Battle of Britain was at its height, Hitler's plans to invade England and the Soviet Union were close to being given the 'green light', and an awful dread filled many a heart.

This war was fought on the Mediterranean, the Atlantic and the Pacific, and in four major land campaigns, in the [Soviet Union](#), [North Africa](#), [Western Europe](#) and the [Far East](#). No less than 56 countries were involved in these violent conflicts, most of which were fought

out to the bitter end between equally well-trained and well-equipped armies, battling day and night for dear life. It was a war that was more cruel, bitter and extensive than any other war in history. The war against Japan was fought over two-thirds of the world's surface, with America and her allies taking part in vast air, land and sea battles. It turned WW II into global conflict and ended it with the dawning of nuclear era.

War in Europe

On [September 1](#), [1939](#), Germany, led by [Adolf Hitler](#) and the [Nazi Party](#), invaded [Poland](#) according to an agreement with the [Soviet Union](#), which joined the invasion on [September 17](#). The United Kingdom and France responded by [declaring war](#) on Germany on [September 3](#), initiating a widespread naval war. Germany rapidly overwhelmed Poland, then Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium and France in 1940, and Yugoslavia and Greece in 1941. Italian, and later German, troops attacked [British forces](#) in [North Africa](#). By summer 1941, Germany had conquered France and most of [Western Europe](#), but it failed to subdue the United Kingdom due to the resistance of the [Royal Air Force](#) and [Royal Navy](#).

Hitler then turned on the [Soviet Union](#), launching a surprise attack (codenamed [Operation Barbarossa](#)) on [June 22](#),

[1941](#)

. Despite enormous gains, the invasion bogged down outside of Moscow in late 1941. The Soviets later encircled and captured the German Sixth Army at the

[Battle of Stalingrad](#)

(1942-43), decisively defeated the

[Axis](#)

during the

[Battle of Kursk](#)

, and broke the

[Siege of Leningrad](#)

. The Red Army then pursued the retreating

[Wehrmacht](#)

all the way to Berlin, and won the street-by-street

[Battle of Berlin](#)

, as Hitler

[committed suicide](#)

in his underground bunker on

[April 30](#)

,
[1945](#)

Meanwhile, the [western Allies](#) invaded Italy in 1943 and then liberated France in 1944, following amphibious landings in the [Battle of Normandy](#).

Repulsing a German counterattack at the

[Battle of the Bulge](#)

in December, the Allies crossed the Rhine River and linked up with the Soviets at the Elbe River in central Germany.

During the war, six million [Jews](#), as well as [Roma](#) and other groups, were murdered by Germany in a state-sponsored genocide known as

[The Holocaust](#)

Text of the Nazi-Soviet Alliance Pact (23 August 1939)

The Government of the German Reich and The Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

Desirous of strengthening the cause of peace between Germany and the U.S.S.R., and proceeding from the fundamental provisions of the Neutrality Agreement concluded in April, 1926 between Germany and the U.S.S.R., have reached the following Agreement:

Article I. Both High Contracting Parties obligate themselves to desist from any act of violence, any aggressive action, and any attack on each other, either individually or jointly with other Powers.

Article II. Should one of the High Contracting Parties become the object of belligerent action by a third Power, the other High Contracting Party shall in no manner lend its support to this third Power.

Article III. The Governments of the two High Contracting Parties shall in the future maintain continual contact with one another for the purpose of consultation in order to exchange information on problems affecting their common interests.

Article IV. Neither of the two High Contracting Parties shall participate in any grouping of powers whatsoever that is directly or indirectly aimed at the other party.

Article V. Should disputes or conflicts arise between the High Contracting Parties over problems of one kind or another, both parties shall settle these disputes or conflicts exclusively through friendly exchange of opinion or, if necessary, through the establishment of arbitration commissions.

Article VI. The present Treaty is concluded for a period of ten years, with the proviso that, in so far as one of the High Contracting Parties does not advance it one year prior to the expiration of this period, the validity of this Treaty shall automatically be extended for another five years.

Article VII. The present Treaty shall be ratified within the shortest possible time. The ratifications shall be exchanged in Berlin. The Agreement shall enter into force as soon as it is signed.

[The section below was not published at the time the above was announced.]

Secret Additional Protocol.

On the occasion of the signature of the Non-Aggression Pact between the German Reich and the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics the undersigned plenipotentiaries of each of the two parties discussed in strictly confidential conversations the question of the boundary of their respective spheres of influence in Eastern Europe. These conversations led to the following conclusions:

Article I. In the event of a territorial and political rearrangement in the areas belonging to the Baltic States (Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), the northern boundary of Lithuania shall represent the boundary of the spheres of influence of Germany and U.S.S.R. In this connection the interest of Lithuania in the Vilna area is recognized by each party.

Article II. In the event of a territorial and political rearrangement of the areas belonging to the Polish State, the spheres of influence of

Germany
and the U.S.S.R. shall be bounded approximately by the line of the rivers Narev,
Vistula
and San.

The question of whether the interests of both parties make desirable the maintenance of an independent Polish State and how such a state should be bounded can only be definitely determined in the course of further political developments.

In any event both Governments will resolve this question by means of a friendly agreement.

Article III. With regard to Southeastern Europe attention is called by the Soviet side to its interest in Bessarabia. The German side declares its complete political disinterest in these areas.

Article IV. This Protocol shall be treated by both parties as strictly secret.

Moscow, August 23, 1939.

For the Government of the German Reich

v. Ribbentrop

Plenipotentiary of the Government of the U.S.S.R.

V. Molotov

Battle of Britain (July-October 1940)

The Battle of Britain in many ways affected the course of the War. An invasion of Britain was impossible without air superiority. Hitler, fearing a cross-Channel invasion, decided that the only way to force the British to seek terms, was to destroy the Soviet Union

. For the AXIS, the loss of the Battle of Britain was a crushing blow, not only because of the serious losses, but because it was a struggle involving scientific and technical ingenuity, in which the Germans had assumed that they had a commanding lead.

Greek contribution to the Allied Victory in WW II

Mussolini attacked Greece October 28, 1940 through Albania. Although often omitted in studies of the World War II, this was to prove perhaps the greatest blunder of the War by the AXIS. Mussolini's 1940 invasion of Greece

had two serious consequences. First it delayed by 6 weeks the time table for the German operation Barbarossa, against the USSR

. Second it resulted in tying down substantial AXIS forces in the Balkans, estimates run as high as 1 million men, that could have been employed in Barbarossa.

Mussolini's invasion was not coordinated with Hitler in advance. The AXIS partners never coordinated their operations like the Allies. Mussolini announced it when Hitler arrived on a visit on the first day of the attack. "Führer, we are on the march."

The Italian troops were beaten back and the Greek troops took over one-third of Albania

.

Greece, being the last of the European countries to be attacked by the AXIS, could have possibly looked for an accommodating arrangement or at least could have remained neutral. Instead Greece stood fast on the side of the Allies, as its then Prime Minister General John Metaxas had decided since 1936 and had prepared the country meticulously to stand up to any attack.

The British sent only about 50,000 troops to help Greece, which they had to deplete from Egypt. This was important, but very inadequate. Critical to the German invasion

was access to the Romanian oil fields. Germany had been relying on Soviet oil deliveries from her Russian Ally, since August 1939, to supplement its synthetic oil production . The Soviet deliveries would end of course when Germany invaded the USSR, leaving the Germans dependant on Romanian oil until the Soviet Caucauses could be seized. Greek successes against the Italians had created an Allied Victory, the very first that far. Greece was of great strategic importance because it could provide air fields to attack the Romanian oil fields.

Hitler thus immediately saw a German intervention to seize Greece and secure Germany's southern flank would be necessary. As a result, German forces in Romania were re-enforced and efforts were made to bring Yugoslavia into the NAZI orbit so that the Panzers could move through that country to attack Greece. Hitler had forced Yugoslavia to join the other AXIS Balkan partners and succeeded, when Yugoslavia signed on March 25, 1941 a Pact with the AXIS. The Yugoslavian Government was overthrown two days later, necessitating a full scale German invasion of the country. At that time Hitler had also to come to the rescue Mussolini, who was defeated after trying for 5 months to concur Greece, and to oust the British troops that since early March 1941, were openly disembarking in Greek ports, in support of Greece and in order to influence Turkey and Yugoslavia to come to the side of the Allies.

The Germans invaded Greece and Yugoslavia simultaneously on April 6, 1941. Belgrade was subjected to Luftwaffe terror bombing for rejecting an alliance with the AXIS. The Germans swept through Yugoslavia and Greece and took Crete with a daring, but costly parachute assault. (Hitler never again allowed a parachute assault.) It took the Germans 2 months to subdue Greece and capture Crete. Crete was seized in a daring and bloody paratroop assault in May 1941.

Despite the success, the Balkan campaign proved to have been a strategic disaster. The Balkans diversion delayed Operation Barbarossa by at least 6 weeks.

If Hitler had started his invasion to of the Soviet Union in the middle of May 1941, as originally planned, it seems highly likely that they would have seized Moscow, if not have defeated the Red Army.

As it was, the Wehrmacht was stopped on the outskirts of Moscow in December 1941. After the NAZI invasion of the Balkans, a guerrilla warfare began between the Nazis and the two groups of Yugoslavians partisans, lead by communist Tito and nationalist Mihajlovic. A similar situation with Greek communist and not communist guerrillas developed in Greece. Hitler held up almost 1 million Germans and other AXIS soldiers in the Balkans.

This was of immense importance, because for Barbarossa to succeed, it had to overwhelm the Soviets as the Wehrmacht had done in France.

Red Army Purge

Stalin beginning May 1937 began a drastic purge, targeting all his potential political opponents. The Army, because of its potential power, was a priority target. Stalin's purge decimated the officer corps and greatly impaired the morale and efficiency of the Red Army. Marshal Tukhachevsky, First Deputy People's Commissar of War and seven other top Red Army generals on June 12, 1937 were found guilty of plotting to betray the Soviet Union to Japan and Germany. Each was summarily shot. Many other generals and colonels were either dismissed or sent to forced-labour camps, in most cases both. [Reese, *Red Army*]

No one knows the precise dimensions of the purges. Even conservative estimates, however, suggest about 30,000 officers were arrested. Three of the Red Army's five marshals were shot, 13 out of 19 army commanders, more than half of the 186 division commanders. Often their families were also arrested.

The devastating effects of Stalin's purges were apparent in the serious defeats suffered by the Red Army during the first months of the NAZI invasion. There was an extreme lack of military professionalism, as officers had been appointed for political loyalty, rather than professional military abilities. Most authors, including Russian sources, maintain that the purges did "monstrous damage" to the Red Army. [Davidson, p. 435.] Some observers maintain that the impacts of the purges have been over emphasized. Other factors such as poorly conceived tactical doctrine and the ineffectiveness of political indoctrination, were other important factors. [Reese, *Stalin's*]

Whatever the reasons, whole Soviet armies surrendered en masse to the Germans. The purge of the Red Army was apparently, if not inspired, at least intensified by NAZI operatives.

Operation Barbarossa (June 1941)

The nature of the War changed decisively in the second half of 1941. When the Germans invaded Russia with a 6 week delay in June 1941, they launched the most sweeping military campaign in history. It is estimated that on

the eve of battle, 6.25 million men faced each other in the East.

The Soviets were surprised and devastated. Stalin ignored warnings from the British, who as a result of breaking the secret message code Ultra, had details on the German preparations. Stalin was convinced that they were trying to draw him into the War and until the actual attack could not believe that Hitler would attack him.

The attack was an enormous tactical success. The Soviets were surprised and devastated. The Soviet Air Force was destroyed, largely on the ground. The Germans captured 3.8 million Soviet soldiers in the first few months of the campaign. Not knowing the true size of the Red Army, they thought they had essentially won the War. German columns seized the major cities of western Russia and drove toward Leningrad and Moscow. But here the Soviets held. The Japanese decision to strike America, allowed the Soviets to shift Siberian reserves and in December 1941 launch a winter offensive stopping the Wehrmacht at the gates of Moscow--inflicting irreplaceable losses.

The army that invaded the Soviet Union had by January 1942 lost a quarter of its strength. Hitler on December 11 declared war on America--the only country he ever formally declared war on. In an impassioned speech, he complained of a long list of violations of neutrality and actual acts of war. [Domarus, pp. 1804-08.] The list was actually fairly accurate. His conclusion, however, that actual American entry into the War would make little difference, proved to be a disastrous miscalculation. The Germans, who months before had faced only a battered, but unbowed Britain, now was locked into mortal combat with the two most powerful nations of the world. The British now had the allies that made a German and Japanese victory virtually impossible. After the Russian offensive of December 1941 and appalling German losses--sceptics began to appear and were given the derisory term "Grafaz".

Emperor Frederick Barbarossa

The code name for the Nazi invasion plan was Operation Barbarossa. Frederick Barbarossa was the Holy Roman Emperor named for his red beard. He drowned in 1190. German legend has it that he would return to life, when his German countrymen needed him to return to glory. The legend told that he had remained hidden at Berchtesgaden, the location of Hitler's Bavarian retreat.

Preparations

So confident was Hitler of success in the Battle of Britain, that on July 21, 1940 he told his top military commanders in great secrecy that he planned to invade the Soviet Union, perhaps motivated by Stalin's annexation of the three Baltic Republics on that day. He ordered General Enrich Marcks the next day to prepare the attack plan. [Gilbert, p. 333.]

As soon as it was clear that there would be no cross-Channel invasion, Hitler began shifting the Wehrmacht eastward to face the enemy that he had longed to fight from the onset--Soviet Russia. Hitler informed his Luftwaffe Commander Goering that the war against Britain required the control of the Soviet oilfields in the Caucasus. Goering was told to prepare a massive air assault for May 1

[Gilbert, p. 351]

The Wehrmacht was instructed to prepare an invasion force that would be one-third motorized providing a force power that the Red Army could not hope to match. Hitler did not see the Soviet invasion as a particularly difficult operation. His initial prejudices, helped to lull him into overconfidence. He saw the Red Army as leaderless. (Here as a result of Stalin's purges he was partly correct.) He saw the Soviet soldier as "mindless". Soviet tank forces he saw as "badly armoured" and could not stand up against superior German equipment. [Gilbert, p. 353.]

Hitler issued Directive No. 18 on December 18, 1940. The goal was a ferocious quick campaign to be launched May 15, 1941 aimed at crushing the Red Army in a quick campaign and establishing a barrier against Asiatic Russia along the Volga-Archangel Line. This is 150 miles east of Moscow, which would have made the Soviet Union an entirely Asiatic country.

German Strategy

World War I had shown the Germans that they lacked the resources for a long drawn out

campaign. The Royal Navy's command of the seas allowed them to import resources from America and its overseas Dominions.

The NAZI conquest of Western resources had provided Hitler with substantial new resources and industrial capacity, but it was only in the East (Russia) that Germany could obtain the resources to fight a protracted war. The grain of the Ukraine, the mineral resources of the Don Basin and the oil of the Caucasus, could fuel a war machine that might be impossible to dislodge from Western Europe.

The Red Army was, however, the only military force on the Continent that rivalled the Wehrmacht. Attacking the Soviet Union with Germany's limited resources was a huge gamble. To succeed, Barbarossa had to destroy the Red Army and cripple Soviet war production. Only then could it secure the rich agricultural and mineral resources of the East needed to fuel Germany's war economy.

World War I had also shown Germany that it must never again fight a two-front war. The world was shocked when Hitler invaded Russia. The invasion was not in fact surprising. Hitler had talked about expansion east in the 1920s and clearly explained his eastern goals in *Mein Kampf*. What was surprising is that he would strike east, before resolving the war in the west. [Bullock] Hitler was, however, convinced that the only thing keeping the British in the war was the hope of an alliance with the Soviets. He believed that the Wehrmacht could easily defeat the Soviets within 3 months at the most. It was an enormous gamble. Failure to achieve these objectives before the onset of winter would expose the Wehrmacht and the NAZI Germany to a war of attrition that Germany did not have the resources to wage.

The invasion was thus an enormous gamble, especially as it lay Germany open to a two-front war. Hitler has seen this as a mistake made in World War I and pledged that he would never make a similar mistake. That said, from Hitler's point of view, it was a gamble that had to be taken. The resources of the East were just too alluring. Both Hitler and Stalin knew that war between the two powers was inevitable. From Hitler's point of view, it was the time to strike, while the Wehrmacht was at a peak of its power and the Red Army still reeling from purges and not yet well equipped with modern weapons.

[Economic Factors](#)

Economic factors were also involved. Not only were the resources of the East needed by the German war machine, but it was extremely costly to maintain Germany's immense army. After the fall of France and the expulsion of Britain from the Continent, this army had sat largely idle. An army of this size was a huge drag on the economy of the Reich. This drag was only partially made up by plundering the economies of the captive nations and the dragooning of civilians in those countries into forced labour within the Reich. This problem was further compounded by the inefficiency of the German war economy and the reluctance to employ German women, other than unmarried youths, in war industries

German Force

Hitler assembled what Goebbels claimed was the greatest concentration of forces in world history. The Germans invasion force totalled 153 divisions, 600,000 million motorized vehicles, 3,580 tanks, 7,184 artillery pieces, and 2,740 air planes. Finish, Hungarian, and Romanian divisions accompanied the Wehrmacht and were soon joined by Italian divisions and the Spanish Blue Division.

Soviet Preparations

Cooperation with Hitler had allowed Stalin at little cost to acquire immense territory. Stalin moved west at the expense of Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Romania. Cooperation with Hitler had thus returned vast dividends. Stalin rejecting the advice of his generals, had moved the Red Army west, to occupy Poland. Substantial elements of the Red Army were deployed along the new western border, without the benefit of prepared defences. This left important elements of the Red Army especially vulnerable to the Wehrmacht.

Stalin even refused to allow defensive measures by front line troops, afraid of provoking Hitler. The only steps he took, on the advice of his generals, was to mobilize reserves in rear areas. Stalin received warnings from British intelligence as well as Soviet intelligence. He was convinced that Hitler would not be so foolish as to invade and that British intelligence was trying to draw him into a war with the NAZIs. As a result, Stalin avoided any kind of action that might bring his cooperation with the NAZIs

in question.

After the war, Churchill wrote, "War is mainly a catalogue of blunders, but it may be doubted whether any mistake in history has equalled that of which Stalin and the Communist Chiefs were guilty, when they ... supinely awaited or were incapable of realizing, the fearful onslaught, which impended over Russia."

Invasion (June 22, 1941)

The nature of the War changed decisively in the second half of 1941. Hitler invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, launching the most sweeping military campaign in history. The Soviets were surprised and devastated. The Luftwaffe destroyed about half of the 10,000 Red Air Force planes on the first day. [Fest, p. 648.] Panzers penetrated deep into Soviet territory. Stalin had ignored warnings from the British, who as a result of Ultra, had details on the German preparations. Stalin was still convinced that they were trying to draw him into the War and until the actual attack could not believe that Hitler would attack him.

The attack was an enormous tactical success. The Soviets were surprised and devastated. The Soviet Air Force was destroyed, largely on the ground. German armies slashed into the Soviet Union in three gigantic formations. Army Group North from East Prussia attacked into the former Baltic Republics, aiming for Leningrad. They were supported by the Finnish Army to the north, attempting to regain the territory seized by Stalin in 1939. Army Group Center moved through what was formerly eastern Poland toward Moscow. Army Group South moved into the Ukraine.

War of Extinction

The Nazis from the onset, began Hitler's war of extermination. Mass executions of Jewish men, women, and children as well as Communists are carried out. The Einsatzgruppen from the SS are responsible for most of the killings, together with local collaborators, but the numbers of Jews encountered are so large that regular Wehrmacht units also participate in the killing.

Prisoners of War

The stunning German victories netted immense numbers of Soviet prisoners of war (POWs). The Germans captured 3.8 million Soviet soldiers in the first few months of the campaign. [Hoffman, p. 131.] It is easy to see why the Germans and Hitler were at first so confident of victory. Not knowing the true size of the Red Army, they thought they had essentially won the War.

German columns seized whole Soviet armies and the major cities of western Russia in gigantic encirclements. Neither camps or supplies existed to handle the huge numbers of captured Russian soldiers. The Germans in the East, at Hitler's orders, were not to follow the international conventions they had generally adhered to in the treatment of POWs in the West. Admiral Canaris, head of the Abwehr, attempted to intercede with Keitel. [Hoffman, pp. 336-337] Keitel knowing full well Hitler's plans, did not pass on Canaris' concerns to Hitler.

Stalin

Soviet Dictator Joseph Stalin was stunned by the German attack. He had been convinced that Hitler, afraid of a two-front war, would never attack until the British had been defeated. He had been warned by Churchill who had details from Ultra intercepts, as well as his own intelligence service. After the attack, Stalin was silent for 12 days, apparently stupefied by the force of the German attack and decimation of Red Army forces. Finally he spoke to the nation and it was not about Communism, but the defence of the Russian motherland. The legendary Great Patriotic War had begun. Stalin also began to deal ruthlessly with Soviet commanders, who would not fight or performed poorly. He considered commanders and soldiers who surrendered deserters. Commanders who retreated or deserted, fared little better. A series of defeated Red army commanders were shot in July. [Davidson, p. 438.]

Churchill and Roosevelt

Churchill was awoken at 8:00 am, with news of the NAZI invasion. (He had standing orders that he is not to be awoken earlier, unless Britain was invaded.) He immediately announced he would speak to the nation that evening. Churchill spent day working on his major addresses. This time he only had hours. He began by reminding the British people of a lifetime of opposition to Communism. Then he explained, "But all this fades away before the spectacle which is now unfolding Can you doubt what our policy will be? We are resolved to destroy Hitler and every vestige of the NAZI regime. From this nothing will turn us--nothing. Any man or state who fights on against Nazidom will have our aid. ... It follows, therefore, that we shall give whatever help we can to Russia and the Russian people."

President Roosevelt was at first uncommittal. Some of his advisers urged him to rush support to the Soviets. His military advisers, including General Marshall, were convinced that the Soviets could not withstand the NAZI onslaught. They advised against rushing aid to the Soviets when America's expanding new army was still not equipped and Britain still in danger. [Goodwin, p. 255.]

First Weeks

German panzer armies penetrated deep into Soviet lines, moving rapidly into the Soviet Union and taking large numbers of prisoners. The Germans drove toward Kiev and the Dnieper in the south and the Baltics and Leningrad in the north. Within 2 weeks the Wehrmacht had reached the Dnieper. Whole Red Armies surrendered. Wehrmacht generals were amazed at the seemingly endless lines of Soviet POWs, as they plunged deep into the Soviet Union. Many were convinced that they were seeing a defeated enemy. The Soviet Union looks to the world as one more country that the NAZIs will roll over. Western military analysts gave the Soviets only a few months. Hitler was jubilant. Stalin was stunned.

The Campaign (July)

The NAZI attack was devastating, but despite massive losses, the Soviets continued to resist. Army Group South in particular experienced difficulties. The Soviets had

anticipated a German strike into the Ukraine, rather than a massive assault all along the border and had much of their armour in the south to protect the Ukraine.

The successes of Army Group central were spectacular.

Driving toward Moscow, they seized Smolensk and over 40 Soviet divisions in early July, opening the way to Moscow.

[The Holocaust](#)

One of Hitler's major goals in the invasion of the Soviet Union was the murder of Russian Jews. Preparations were laid for murdering Jews as part of the invasion. The Nazis in 1939 had not yet worked out, what was to be done with the Jews. As a result, while there were many killings, most were rounded up and confined into ghettos.

The success of the Wehrmacht in 1939-40 had convinced Hitler and other Nazis that they could begin the mass slaughter of Jews. There was no written document, but Hitler some time in late 1940 or early 1941 must have ordered Himmler to prepare for mass killings with the invasion of the Soviet Union. The Nazi genocide had not yet been perfected and large scale gas chambers were not yet operating at Auschwitz and other Polish concentration camps. The SS created four Einsatzgruppen to accompany the Wehrmacht and kill Jews in large numbers. Full details are not available, but we know from the similarities in many of the killing actions that the Einsatzgruppen were well trained and procedures developed for maximum efficiency. Heydrich was in overall command of these killing machines and he was known for his meticulous planning.

The Campaign (August-September)

The Wehrmacht Commanders after Smolensk wanted to drive on to the Soviet capital--Moscow. The Soviet Union was a highly centralized state and Moscow was its nerve center. Communications and transportation was centralized on Moscow. Hitler disappointed with the lack of progress by Army Group South, however, ordered elements of Army Group Center needed to drive on Moscow be diverted south. Here the Wehrmacht achieved one of the most stunning victories in military history. The Germans in September took Kiev, the capital of the Ukraine, destroying seven Soviet armies. Hitler called it, "The greatest victory of all time".

German Situation (September)

The Germans by September had scored stunning successes. Whole Soviet armies had been enveloped and destroyed and the major cities of the western Soviet Union were in German hands. Yet the Germans faced growing difficulties. Soviet Resistance was stiffening, especially the forces around Leningrad commanded by Marshall Zukov.

Army Group Center, having been diverted south, had made little progress east of Smolensk toward Moscow. Logistical problems were becoming increasingly severe. The Wehrmacht was not a fully mechanized army. There was still horse drawn artillery. Supply lines were stretched and Soviet partisans had begun to form in rear areas.

Although still encountered in only small numbers, the Wehrmacht was horrified to learn that the new T34 Soviet tank was superior to the vaunted NAZI panzers.

Unlike the campaign in the West, the Germans could not bring the full force of the Luftwaffe to bear against the Soviets.

Planes and crews had been lost in the Battle of Britain, and substantial forces had to be maintained in France and Germany against Britain, which continued to bomb Germany. The Soviets had in addition succeeded in moving whole armament plants east beyond the Volga, where the Luftwaffe without long range bombers could not reach them.

All throughout the campaign, Soviet factories continued to out produce German industry and were beginning to produce the T34 tank in numbers. The German resources although immense, were not unlimited and in the end did not match Hitler's avarice.

German Intelligence

The Germans had very effectively estimated the strength of front line Red Army units, their locations and their defences. The attacks on the opening of Barbarossa, devastated these units. German tactical intelligence through Luftwaffe reconnaissance was excellent. The German strategic intelligence capability was weak and they failed to accurately estimate either the strength of Russian reserves in the rear. [Glantz, p. 23.]

Russian Resistance

Stalin's purges of the Red Army and German successes in the initial months of Barbarossa had resulted in the loss of huge numbers of trained officers. Stalin's refusal to allow a rational deployment of the Red Army and his insistence that there be no retreat, were also major factors in the stunning German victories. In the end it was the stubbornness and tenacity of the average Red Army soldier that managed to stop the better trained and more professional German Wehrmacht, before Leningrad and Moscow. The savagery of the German assault and appeals to Russian patriotism were major factors in the stiffening of Russian resistance.

The Campaign (October-November)

After Kiev, the Wehrmacht resumed the drive of Army Group Center to Moscow. But in October the rains came. There were no autobahns in Russia and few paved roads. The dirt roads became quagmires. The movement of trucks, tanks, personnel carrier, and artillery slowed considerably. Unlike the campaign in the west, in the east the distances were immense. Logistical problems increased. Then the winter came early. Freezing temperatures were reported in early November.

Winter

The Winter of 1941-42 was one of the most severe in Russian history. The Wehrmacht was totally unprepared. The Germans had not been issued warm weather clothing and their equipment was not built for winter operations. The mud clogged roads of the Fall rains and then the early onset of Winter had denied the Wehrmacht of one of its key advantages--mobility. As the temperatures fell, German tanks could not even be started, without first building a fire underneath to heat the engines. Guns froze.

The Russians on the other hand were prepared for winter weather and had tactics and equipment for it. Russian resistance was stiffening by October-December, but the cold winter weather, which enveloped the Wehrmacht by late November, had a devastating impact on fighting efficiency and the operation of German equipment.

The Wehrmacht desperately rushed available supplies of warm clothing and winter lubricants to the front, but they proved inadequate and hard to deliver. The Wehrmacht was at the extreme limit of its supply routes and the winter weather. A HBC reader reports, "Talking to Germans just after the war, they indicated it was the bitter cold that stopped them. They could not start their tanks or fire their weapons. They were not prepared for this type of Winter warfare. Hitler required the German population to donate and send heavy clothing to their troops. Loads of Winter clothing were sent to the Eastern front. Many German soldiers froze to death during the fierce fighting before Moscow."

Russian Counter-Offensive (December 1941)

The Japanese decision to strike America, allowed the Soviets to shift Siberian reserves. A Japanese spy in Tokyo had informed Stalin well before the actual attack on Pearl Harbor. These troops, well trained in winter warfare, launched on December 6, 1941 a winter offensive stopping the Wehrmacht at the gates of Moscow--inflicting irreplaceable losses. The Wehrmacht was stunned at the extent of the Soviet offensive, assuming that the staggering victories in the Summer had crippled the Red Army.

There were no preparations made, such as winter clothing or assessing the performance of weapons in extremely cold winter conditions. Hitler had assumed that the campaign would defeat the Soviets in the summer and before the onset of Winter. Hitler demanded that the Wehrmacht stand and fight. This probably saved the Wehrmacht from an even greater disaster than occurred. An entire Germany Army, the 16th Army of more than 90,000 men, was essentially cut off and only supplied with an enormous effort by the Luftwaffe. A land corridor was not re-established until April 1942. The massive Axis army that invaded the Soviet Union had by January 1942 lost a quarter of its strength and huge numbers of tanks, artillery, and supplies. These losses of men and material by the Wehrmacht were especially grievous and Germany did not have the manpower resources or industrial capacity to fully replace and reequip a new army.

[Pearl Harbor](#) (December 7, 1941)

Japan and the Soviets fought pitched battles along the Manchurian border in 1939. An

offensive by Marshall Zukov forced the Japanese to ask for an armistice. Still the Soviets kept important forces on the border. Japan in late 1941 was poised for a military strike to take advantage of the fighting in Europe. There were two basic options: strike north at the Soviets or South at the resources of Southeast Asia. The decision was to strike south. Here the only force to oppose the Japanese was the U.S. Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbor. A Japanese carrier taskforce on December 7, 1941, executed a surprise attack on the American Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor. It was a brilliant tactical victory for Japan, but perhaps the greatest mistake in modern military history as it brought a suddenly united America with its vast industrial capacity into the War.

The T-34 Tank

Many assessments of World War II focus on the German Panzers. The Nazis assumed that the Soviet Union was a backward country incapable of producing the same high quality as Aryan supermen.

The appearance of the T-34 tank on the battlefield in late 1941 was a shock to the Wehrmacht, as it was in fact superior to the German Panzers. The T-34 tank is considered by many to be the finest tank of the War. The T-34 was the perfect balance of mobility (wide tracks, excellent speed), firepower (76mm or 85mm cannon) and armour protection (low profile and innovative sloped armour).

The T-34 tank was also relatively inexpensive to build and easily maintained. This was in sharp contrast to the much more complicated German tanks. Unknown to the Germans, even as the Wehrmacht was driving into the Soviet Union during the Summer of 1941, T-34 tanks were rolling out of production lines in far greater numbers than German tanks.

Russian War Production

Stalin had built an industrial base capable of producing war material on an immense level. The Germans were not aware of the full Soviet potential, neither the quantity nor the quality of Soviet production.

The Soviets managed to pack up and move whole factories east, where they could not be reached by the Luftwaffe's tactical bombers. Output at many of these factories was not back to full production until 1943. Even so, the output of these Soviet factories alone exceeded German production.

Thus when British and American production were added, it is clear to what extent Barbarossa had changed the strategic balance. And it was not just in quantitative terms. Soviet war production was rationalized. Production of obsolete weapons was terminated and that of more effective weapons like the T-34 tank expanded.

Soviet artillery was of a high standard.

While the Red Air Force was devastated at the onset of Barbarossa, because of obsolete planes, new planes like the Yak fighters (Yak 1, 7, and 9s) and the IL-2 Stormovik were high quality planes that in capable hands could and did taken on the Luftwaffe.

These planes were also produced in enormous numbers

More than 37,000 Yaks were produced by the Russians, more than any other fighter in the War.

As the Allied air assault on Germany intensified in 1943 and the Luftwaffe had to pull back to defend German cities, the Germans also began losing their advantage in the air that they had during Barbarossa.

Weaknesses

Perhaps the fatal weakness in Barbarossa was Hitler himself. His racial hatred and penchant for mindless violence, turned large numbers of Soviet citizens, who hated Stalin and the Communists and were potential allies against the Germans. Millions of Russians and Ukrainians embraced the Wehrmacht, viewing them as liberators. Many Russian soldiers willingly surrendered to the Germans.

Hitler's barbaric plans for the

[occupied East](#)

were soon evident to these potential allies. Hitler's War was not just a war against Communism, but in fact war against the Soviet people themselves.

Hitler's avarice was another factor. Soviet resources offered so much to the German war effort, that Hitler kept changing his priorities. The Panzers made great progress in moving rapidly toward Leningrad and Moscow. When victory may have been within his

grasp, he turned the Panzers south toward the resources of the Ukraine. Then he focused on Moscow again, but the weeks lost were just enough for the Soviets to organize a defence before the onset of Winter. (Hitler's inability to set reasonable goals and priorities and stick to them, would also doom his 1942 Summer offensive.)

Balance of Power

The Germans who months before had faced only a battered, but unbowed Britain, now was locked into mortal combat with the two most powerful nations of the world. The British now had the allies that made a German and Japanese victory virtually impossible. After the Russian offensive of December 1941 and appalling German losses--sceptics began to appear and were given the derisory term "Grafaz".

Assessment

Barbarossa had achieved some startling successes. Panzer armies had spearheaded immense encircling manoeuvres that had killed or taken over 6 million Red Army soldiers. Great quantities of military equipment had been destroyed or captured. An immense swath of European Russia was in German hands.

Even so, it had failed in its principal objectives. The Red Army had not been destroyed and Russian war industries continued to produce. As a result, the Wehrmacht by 1942 had been seriously weakened. It was the failure of Barbarossa to destroy the Red Army in a swift, Summer campaign, that doomed NAZI Germany.

Not only did Hitler now face the prospect of a two-front war, but a war against opponents with far greater resources than the Reich. The failure of Barbarossa also left the Wehrmacht in a position to launch a much less powerful offensive in 1942, one that could only be conducted with force in the South and which culminated at [Stalingrad](#)

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