

Operation Barbarossa

Stalls Out

By John T. Correll



Hitler's biggest military mistake was invading the Soviet Union. He had expected it to be an easy victory in six or eight weeks.

In the spring of 1941, the nonaggression pact between Germany and the Soviet Union was 18 months old and wearing thin. The warning signs were abundant. The Germans made little effort to conceal their massive buildup of forces or their daily reconnaissance flights across the border.

At least two intelligence reports, one from a German army deserter and the other from a secret agent, accurately forecast the exact day and hour for the coming German invasion of Russia. The Soviet Embassy in Berlin obtained a copy of a German-Russian phrase book for soldiers with such useful lines as, "Hands up or I shoot!"

Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin dismissed the warnings. He did not believe his nominal ally, Adolf Hitler, would risk opening a second front in the east while Germany was still engaged against Britain in the

German soldiers unload a Junker Ju 52 transport, lugging the supplies on sleds through the snow. Anticipating a quick victory, the Germans were not prepared for the brutality of a Russian winter.



west. To avoid provoking Hitler, Stalin gave orders not to fire on the reconnaissance overflights. The border guards were not reinforced, nor were they put on alert.

Thus the Russians were taken by surprise when the Germans launched their invasion before dawn on June 22, 1941. Three German army groups, preceded by Luftwaffe bombers and fighters, surged with ease through the sluggish Soviet defenses. Within a month, they had pushed 450 miles into Russian territory.

Hitler believed the offensive, which he named Operation Barbarossa, would lead to victory over the Soviet Union within a few months. Military observers in the United States and Britain likewise predicted a Russian defeat.

In actuality, Hitler had just made the biggest of his numerous military mistakes.

HITLER LOOKS EAST

Hitler's plans to conquer Russia were of long standing and well known. In *Mein Kampf* in 1925, he laid claim to "the 'soil and territory' of 'Russia and her border states' as 'living space' for Germans after the regular occupants were evicted. He repeated his intentions periodically.

The nonaggression pact of August 1939 was a temporary arrangement of expediency for both sides. It let Hitler concentrate on subjugating western Europe without worrying about the eastern front. Stalin gained time to rebuild the Soviet armed forces, badly depleted by his own political purges of the Red Army in 1937.

A secret protocol to the pact divided up eastern Europe into German and Russian spheres of influence. Hitler and Stalin each took a share of Poland. The Soviet Union annexed the Baltic states.

Foiled by German failure in the Battle of Britain in 1940, Hitler resumed his determination to invade and exploit eastern Europe and Russia. The plan was called Operation Barbarossa—"Red Beard"—the nickname of Germanic Emperor Frederick I who hammered the Slavs in the 12th century.

Hitler disagreed with his generals, who proposed to take Moscow as soon as possible. In addition to its political value, Moscow was the hub of Russian transportation and communications lines. Hitler thought it more important to secure the agricultural and industrial areas of the Balkans and the Baltic. Hitler's opinion prevailed, of course.

Fuhrer Directive 21 on Dec. 18, 1940, called for three army groups to push toward Leningrad, Moscow, and Kiev—but Moscow was a secondary objective. When the army group in the center reached



Clockwise from left: A single-seat Il-2 Sturmovik assault aircraft at an airfield in Russia in 1941-42; German soldiers on Panzer tanks at the beginning of the Eastern campaign in June 1941; a German soldier examines a dead Russian tank soldier in front of a burning Russian BT-7 light tank during the early days of Operation Barbarossa.



Smolensk, its panzers would split off north and south to join the assault on Ukraine and Leningrad.

There would be plenty of time to worry about Moscow after victory on the northern and southern flanks. The planners assumed a campaign of six to eight weeks, four months at most. Winter clothing was ordered for less than a third of the invasion force.

Barbarossa was timed to begin on the shortest night of the year, to allow the invasion force as much daylight as possible. In the early phase of the operation, the Luftwaffe was to neutralize the

Russian air force and support the German ground forces. The directive specified that the Soviet arms industry would not be attacked until the main operation was completed.

LINES ON THE MAP

The division of spoils in 1939 had a significant side effect: The buffer zone that had previously separated Russia and Germany was eliminated. Now they faced each other directly over a new border that ran for more than 1,000 miles from the Baltic to the Black Sea and that bisected Poland.

Once the invasion force entered the Soviet Union, the front would spread out rapidly like an expanding fan. However, the Germans did not want all of Russia. They intended to stop well before reaching the Urals, along a new line that would extend some 2,000 miles from Archangel to Astrakhan. They regarded the expanse of Asia beyond there as a wasteland.

Neither side was yet settled into fortifications on the new border, but throughout the first half of 1941, the Germans steadily moved troops, tanks, and artillery forward into Poland and East Prussia.

In a single month between April and June, the Luftwaffe violated Soviet airspace 180 times to fly reconnaissance missions over the Russian defenses. Stalin raised no objection.

Stalin wanted to delay an armed confrontation with Hitler as long as he could, but eternally suspicious, he also imagined the British were feeding him misleading information in order to draw Russia into the war.

By late June, the Germans had assembled about three million troops, accounting for about 80 percent of their



army, in position to strike. The Russians had about the same number of forces in the four military districts facing the German front, but this rough numerical parity was offset by the German advantage in quality.

The German *Schwerpunkt*, or strategic “heavy point,” was in the center, where Col. Gen. Heinz Guderian and his Panzer Group 2 stood on the banks of the Bug River east of Warsaw, waiting to lead the attack. They were only 700 miles from Moscow.

THE LAST BLITZKRIEG

Operation Barbarossa was based on faith in blitzkrieg and contempt for the Russians. The Germans had introduced blitzkrieg, or “lightning war,” in their victories in western Europe, using the shock effect of coordinated panzers, motorized infantry, and aircraft—especially Ju 87 Stuka dive bombers—to blow away the opposing forces in their path.

In the Barbarossa invasion, the Germans would employ blitzkrieg for one last time in World War II, counting on their combat experience and superior technology to prevail over the sheer Russian numbers.

The greatest military resource of the Soviet Union was its huge population, which provided almost limitless manpower for the Red Army. In 1941, the Soviet forces had 5.5 million men under arms with a reserve of 14 million available for mobilization.

The Red Army had 23,000 tanks. The Soviet *Voyenno-Vozdushnye Sily*, or VVS, was the world’s largest air force. It had about 20,000 airplanes, but the vast majority of them were obsolete, many of them old biplanes.

The Soviet forces were raw and disorganized. In 1939-40, they had been severely battered in an unsuccessful attempt to overwhelm little Finland, even though the Russians committed three times as many soldiers and 30 times as many airplanes as the Finns did.

When Operation Barbarossa began, the Russians had about half of their active ground forces stationed in the west, facing the Germans. The rest were in Siberia and the Far East. Of the 70 VVS air divisions, 48 were on the Western Front, many of them based near the border, within easy reach for a strike by the Luftwaffe.

The Germans had the sturdy Panzer III tank, the superb Bf 109 fighter, the Ju 87 Stuka, the Bf 110, Ju 88, and He 111 medium bombers, and excellent leaders at all levels. They had no long-range bombers, but the main deficiency was that their logistics infrastructure could not cope with the distances and conditions the Germans would encounter in Russia.

INVASION

Barbarossa opened at precisely 3:15 a.m. on June 22 with an artillery bombardment by 6,000 guns. Concurrently, the first wave of German troops surged across the border. Thirty Luftwaffe bombers with crews specially trained for night operations struck at 10 selected Soviet airfields.

At sunrise, at 4:10 a.m., the Luftwaffe launched in strength. Five hundred high-level bombers, 270 dive bombers, and 480 fighters, swept in ahead of the ground forces. Among their targets were 66 Russian airfields, where they found the airplanes parked out in the open, close together in neat rows.

The attack took the Soviets by surprise and there was no coordinated resistance. Stalin did not believe reports of the attack and was slow to react. It was 7:15 a.m. before he gave the first order to resist, stipulating even then that Soviet ground troops were not to cross the border without specific authorization. He did not declare a general counteroffensive until 9:15 p.m., fully 18 hours after the invasion began.

On the central front, the panzers crossed the Bug River before the Russians could



German Federal Archives photo by Albert Cusian

German soldiers push a car stuck in the mud in October 1941. Snowfall followed by rain made progress on the dirt roads slow for the Germans. In November, heavy snows began, and temperatures plummeted to 52 degrees below zero. Most German troops did not have winter gear.

detonate the demolition charges on the bridges. The Germans broke through everywhere, pushing the Russian divisions aside, capturing thousands of soldiers, and disrupting telephone and telegraph lines.

Stalin did not clear the Soviet fighters to take off until the bombardment was four hours old. The VVS fought fiercely in scattered instances. Nineteen times that day, Russian pilots rammed their aging aircraft into German bombers. Nevertheless, by nightfall 1,800 Soviet aircraft had been destroyed, more than half of them on the ground.

Within a few days, the Luftwaffe had established undisputed air supremacy and before the end of the month, had destroyed 4,614 Russian aircraft. What had been the world’s largest air force was no longer a factor in the ongoing battle.

On June 24, Hitler arrived at his forward command post near Rastenburg in East Prussia to direct the invasion.

All four of the Soviet armies facing the German center were encircled and defeated. In two months, the Red Army lost 700,000 soldiers killed or wounded and almost a million taken prisoner. The



Photo via Ria Novosti



Germans had advanced 500 miles and controlled the western part of the Soviet Union.

DIVERSION

By the middle of July, the Germans were 200 miles from Moscow with only a weak blocking force in front of them. Hitler's generals beseeched him to press on, but he would not hear of it.

Instead, he reinforced the earlier plan, requiring the panzer groups to break off the advance toward Moscow and join the assault on Leningrad in the north and the conquest of the Ukraine and Crimea to the south. "My generals know nothing about the economic aspects of war," Hitler said.

Hitler did permit the bombing of Moscow, but the Luftwaffe did not fly many missions and most of them consisted of fewer than 10 aircraft each. The effect was negligible.

The diversion to the flanks was enormously successful in the short term. In September, the Germans laid siege to Leningrad and captured Kiev, where the Russians sustained losses of 616,000 killed or captured. Entire Soviet field armies ceased to exist.

However, Operation Barbarossa had begun to take its toll on the Germans. Their strategy since 1939 had focused on short, intensive campaigns. Logistics was a blind spot. The Germans were poorly prepared to sustain or replenish their forces in extended engagements. They manufactured fewer airplanes in

Clockwise from above: A German soldier surrenders to a Russian soldier in November 1941; German soldiers dig out a Panzer tank stuck deep in the snow in December 1941; Yak-1 aircraft, such as this one, were stripped of their wheels and outfitted with skis to better take off and land in the harsh Russian winter.

1941 than they did in 1940, and they had not replaced all of their losses from the Battle of Britain.

The Russian scorched earth policy left nothing behind for the Germans to use. The supply lines were longer now, and more dependent on primitive roads. The Luftwaffe often flew from dirt airstrips while the VVS had the use of better fields around Moscow.

On Oct. 2, Hitler ordered resumption of the offensive on Moscow in Operation Typhoon, a separately designated operation within Barbarossa. The advancing Germans inflicted punishing defeats on the Soviet forces between them and Moscow but the diversion to the flanks had consumed two months.

The Germans had allotted four months for Operation Barbarossa. The timeline was running behind and winter was coming on. Through October, the Wehrmacht had suffered 686,000 casualties, the Luftwaffe readiness rate had plummeted, and the panzer divisions were at 35 percent of required strength.

RUSSIA REBOUNDS

Stalin and the Russians were not as clumsy or as dull-witted as they may have seemed earlier. To the utter

surprise of the Germans and the rest of the world, they managed an astounding recovery in a very short time.

By some estimates, the Red Army lost almost five million men during Operation Barbarossa. By any count, the peacetime force was virtually eradicated in the first three months, but Stalin rebuilt it in record time through redeployments and mobilization.

The most immediate source of fresh troops was the Russian army in the Far East, on guard against the Japanese. Fortunately for Stalin, a Soviet-Japanese neutrality pact signed in 1941 still held. The Japanese, focused on their expansion in the Pacific, were not ready to come to the aid of their German allies.

Stalin brought half of the Soviet Far East forces to augment the defense of Moscow and formed new reserve armies by mobilization. In December, the Red Army was back to full strength. Russian soldiers, motivated by the attack on



their homeland, fought harder and the battles increasingly went in their favor.

Industrial recovery was even more amazing. Prior to the invasion, most of the Soviet arms plants were in eastern Russia and the Ukraine. Between July and November, 1,523 entire factories were stripped down, transported, and reassembled in the safety of the Urals, Siberia, and Central Asia. This incredible transfer required about 1.5 million rail cars.

Aircraft production dropped during the move, but within 90 days output had risen above the previous level. In the last half of 1941, the Russians produced vastly more fighter aircraft than the Germans did—5,173 to 1,619.

Development of new Russian weapon systems started well before the invasion. Notable among these was the Yak-1 fighter, introduced in February 1940. It was nearly equal in speed, maneuverability, and firepower to the Bf 109, but the VVS did not have many of them when the war started

and most were lost in the first days of fighting. New production enabled the effective use of the Yak-1 in the battle for Moscow.

The Il-2 Sturmovik ground attack aircraft made its combat debut at the battle for Minsk in June 1941. The single-engine Il-2 was often called “the flying tank” because it was so heavily armored that it was almost impervious to light machine gun fire. It was adept at bombing the Germans from altitudes as low as 300 feet.

The Panzer III was outclassed by the Russian T-34 tank, introduced in October. It had sloping armor plates that deflected German shells and a 76 mm gun that blew big holes in the panzers. It also had wide tracks that rolled on top of the mud in which the panzers bogged down.

WINTER

As Napoleon learned in 1812, Russian winters are severe. It was to the sheer bad luck of the Germans that the winter of 1941-42 was the coldest of the century, and it came early.

The first snow fell on Oct. 6. It melted quickly but was followed by a stretch of heavy rainfall. The dirt roads turned to mud, slowing the advancement toward Moscow to a crawl. November brought colder weather, freezing the mud and allowing the German tanks and trucks to move again.

Later that month, the temperature fell to 52 degrees below zero. “Water froze in the boilers of railroad engines, oil froze in trucks, grease froze in guns, and the mechanized German army had to seek horses to hitch to its tanks,” said historian Nicholas Bethell. “Wounded foot soldiers often died where they fell, not from their injuries but from shock and frostbite.”

Then came the snow, obliterating landmarks, closing resupply routes, and hampering aircraft takeoffs and landings. Rubber aircraft tires turned brittle in the cold. The Russian airfields, built for winter conditions, remained open. The Yak fighters were painted white for camouflage and their wheels were replaced with skis. Some of the Russian rifle battalions were on skis as well. Wide-tread T-34 tanks rode on the crest of the snow.

The Luftwaffe gave thanks to Field Marshal Erhard Milch, who had overcome

official refusals and insisted on warm clothing for his airmen. Belatedly, overcoats were ordered for the ground forces and shipped to rear echelon railheads in Russia. Few of them reached the fighting front before winter took hold.

The staggering German army got within 10 miles of Moscow, close enough to see the Kremlin with field glasses, but on the morning of Dec. 5, the Russians launched their counterattack.

Additional Red Army troops arrived from Siberia in trains pulled by insulated locomotives that held their steam in the cold. Air superiority now belonged to the VVS, which had more than twice as many airplanes on the Moscow front as the Luftwaffe did.

Recognizing the possibility that his entire force could be lost, Hitler on Dec. 8 issued Fuhrer Directive 39, declaring that German forces around Moscow were to “halt immediately all large-scale offensive operations and go on the defensive.”

Operation Barbarossa was over, five months, two weeks, and two days after it began. In that time, the Russians had sustained four million casualties, the Germans one million. Tanks and aircraft were lost by the tens of thousands, and the devastation was enormous to 400,000 square miles of Soviet territory.

Hitler was not willing to give it up. The army was permitted to withdraw to fortified positions as rallying points, but the fight to dominate the Soviet Union would continue.

There were more battles to come in the Soviet Union, notably at Stalingrad, where Field Marshal Friedrich Paulus defied orders from Hitler and surrendered the German Sixth Army in January 1943 after it was cut off and surrounded.

The Germans never regained the hopes and expectations with which they had begun Operation Barbarossa. They fell back, steadily and grudgingly, pushed by the resurgent Red Army.

The remnants of the German armies on the Russian front made their last stand in April 1945 on the Oder River, a few miles east of Berlin. That battle, which they lost, was the prelude to the German surrender on May 7. ★

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