GlobalResearch
Center for Research on Globalization

History of World War II: Conduct of Hitler's "Operation Barbarossa" against Russia

Soviet inhabitants soon turned against their German occupiers.

By Shane Quinn
Global Research, November 02, 2018

Region: Europe, Russia and FSU
Theme: History

The method of warfare fought by Hitler's forces in the Soviet Union would, before long, come back to haunt them. By pursuing a conflict in extreme ideological terms against Russia, it steeled the Red Army's resolve in overcoming the "fascist hordes" at whatever cost.

Hitler had titled his march eastwards "Operation Barbarossa", named after King Frederick Barbarossa, a red-bearded Prussian emperor who centuries before had waged war against the Slavs.

In Soviet territory, Hitler demanded his men undertake "war of annihilation" procedures. These murderous assaults eventually rebounded onto the Germans, who were dealt little mercy as they themselves had shown. By indiscriminately targeting Soviet soldiers and civilians, the Nazis were already sowing the seeds of their own defeat, though they did not yet know it.

A proportion of the USSR's citizens, such as those in the Ukraine, had welcomed the Germans as gallant saviors releasing them at last from Stalin's iron grip. The July and August 1941 arrival onto Ukrainian lands of Hitler's young, undefeated foot soldiers – some golden-haired and many bronzed from the glowing sun – had indeed seduced certain Ukrainian civilians.

As German troops pushed deeper into the lush wheatfields of the Ukraine, growing numbers came forth from country homesteads to warmly greet their apparent rescuers. The ancient offering of bread and salt was graciously provided to Nazi infantrymen, as were flowers.

Joseph Goebbels' propaganda machine was working away seamlessly too. German officers, standing upon platforms in town squares, were handing out large color posters to civilians of an aristocratic-looking Führer, dressed in full military attire, and staring imperiously across his shoulder into the distance. At the bottom of each poster a caption in Ukrainian read, "Hitler the Liberator".

To some in the Ukraine that is how it seemed, in the beginning at least. During that long, fateful summer of 1941, as the world watched on in wonder, it looked like nothing would ever stop the Germans in their advance towards Russia's great cities. From the 22 June attack, after just a week of fighting, the Wehrmacht was already halfway to the capital Moscow. Such news sent Hitler into raptures at his Wolf's Lair headquarters in East Prussia, whose construction had been completed hours before the invasion.

Towards the end of July 1941, following a month of combat, the Nazis had claimed an area double the size of their own country. It was a scale of victory that would have subdued any other European country.

Before too long, however, the severity of Hitler's policies would turn the smiling villagers into wary adversaries of the German Reich. Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, Hitler's right arm during the war years, noted that when the dictator firmly set his mind on a decision, he would follow it through to the end. So it would be in this ideological conflict quickly descending into hatred.

Early in 1941, Hitler had said of the impending Russian attack,

> "You have only to kick in the door and the whole rotten structure will come crashing down".

After more than three months of fighting, Hitler insisted during his Berlin Sportpalast speech of 3 October 1941 that,

> "this enemy [Russia] is already broken and will never rise again".

The Nazi leader further outlined that his soldiers were,

> "fighting on a front of gigantic length and against an enemy who, I must say, does not consist of human beings but of animals or beasts. We have now seen what Bolshevism can make of human beings".

In the Ukraine, Hitler's war of ruin served only to swell partisan numbers, while sending floods of Ukrainian men to the ranks of Soviet Armies – millions would inevitably join Stalin's forces. The Nazi enslavement of countless Ukrainians by turning them into medieval laborers also disillusioned the society, while large-scale murders of the Jewish population drew much horror.

Clockwise from top left: German soldiers advance through Northern Russia, German flamethrower team in the Soviet Union, Soviet planes flying over German positions near Moscow, Soviet prisoners of war on the way to German prison camps, Soviet soldiers fire at German positions. (Source: CC BY-SA 3.0)

Had the invasion been conducted through avoidance of these mass killings, such as in the manner of Germany's 1940 offensive against France, it may have weakened the Soviet soldiers' fortitude. Hitler and his followers viewed the French racial composition as of a superior creed, however.

By directing an inhumane warfare in the east, it was impossible for the Nazis to convince local inhabitants theirs was a just motive. Sympathy swept behind the Soviet cause, and even towards Stalin himself, whose Great Purge remained fresh in the memory.

Some short years after the Second World War – across in the Caribbean – a critical factor allowing Cuba's revolutionary, Fidel Castro, to claim power in the heartland of American dominion was the form of warfare he pursued. Castroite forces avoided the depredations of conflict witnessed elsewhere, such as wanton murder and torture. In turn, this clean conduct of battle diluted the fighting desire of Castro's opponents, while bolstering his reputation among the Cuban people.

Of Hitler's troops Castro noted they,

> "didn't let any Bolsheviks escape with their lives, and I really don't know how the people in the Soviet resistance might have treated the Nazis who fell prisoner. I don't think they could do what we did [let prisoners go]. If they turned one of those fascists loose, the next day he'd be killing Soviet men, women and children again".

Castro's units were battling the soldiers of Fulgencio Batista – a corrupt dictator who since 1952 was sustained mostly by American financial might. Despite the rebels being eternally outnumbered against Batista, by the late 1950s they had gathered crucial momentum.

Castro said his compliance of the laws of war, apart from its ethical aspect, was also,

> "a psychological factor of great importance. When an enemy comes to respect and even admire their adversary, you've won a psychological victory… I once said to those who accused us of violating human rights, 'I defy you to find a single case of extra-judicial execution; I defy you to find a single case of torture'… I say to you that no war is ever won through terrorism. It's that simple, because if you employ terrorism you earn the opposition, hatred and rejection of those whom you need in order to win the war. That's why we had the support of over 90% of the population in Cuba".

In the Soviet Union, however, Hitler's fanaticism failed to recognize the benefits, both moral and emotional, of avoiding arbitrary murder. By engaging in a war of terror, the Nazis delegitimized their purported reason for arriving as "liberators", which held no basis in reality.

Occasionally, Hitler overcame his ideological mindset by revealing unusual, contradictory viewpoints. On separate instances, he remarked that sections of the Soviet population were racially purer than even that of the Germans.

Even before his attack on Poland, Hitler had said,

> "Today the Siberians, the White Russians, and the people of the steppes live extremely healthy lives. For that reason, they are better equipped for development and in the long run biologically superior to the Germans".

When the war turned in Russia's favor from early 1943 onward, it was an argument Hitler would put forward with growing consistency.

Previously, in late summer 1940, after the Wehrmacht had routed French armies in the west, Hitler predicted to his generals Wilhelm Keitel and Alfred Jodl that, "a campaign against Russia would be child's play".

It was a gross misjudgment of what lay ahead. The triumphs the Nazis had enjoyed, from autumn 1939 to the spring of 1941, cannot have been lost on Hitler as he watched German armies sweep to one easy victory after another. The apparent invulnerability of his soldiers emboldened Hitler, making him reckless and foolhardy. It also set a foundation for complacency.

During Albert Speer's time as the German armaments minister (1942-45), he oversaw a hugely productive war economy; however, by 1943, as Germany's weapons industry soared it was by then too late. Speer lamented that his total war strategies had not been implemented from 1940 – he estimated that, utilizing these policies, the German war machine which attacked Russia could perhaps have been twice larger than it was in 1941.

Almost four million Nazi-led units marched eastwards in June 1941, supported by over 3,000 tanks and up to 5,000 aircraft. The Soviets had much greater numbers of both airplanes and tanks, though many models were at that stage of an inferior quality to their German rivals.

Hitler also allowed himself to be misled by faulty military intelligence underestimating Russian strength; he was swayed too by the Soviets' dismal performance against Finland in the Winter War of 1939. When it came to defending their own soil, the Red Army would be a different proposition.

While Hitler was disregarding Russian capacities, he had forgotten the woes that befell Napoleon during his 1812 invasion of the motherland. The French emperor attacked Russia on 24 June 1812 with almost 700,000 men, then the largest force in history – as early as mid-October 1812 Napoleon was set in retreat, and by December he had lost about 500,000 soldiers. Siberian conditions gnawed away at French hearts, as the Russians fought bitterly, employing scorched earth tactics.

France's invasion of Russia was the Napoleonic Wars' bloodiest battle, a turning point whose outcome weakened French hegemony in Europe, while damaging Napoleon's once infallible reputation. It was a lesson from history that Hitler failed to heed.

*

Note to readers: please click the share buttons above. Forward this article to your email lists. Crosspost on your blog site, internet forums. etc.

Shane Quinn obtained an honors journalism degree. He is interested in writing primarily on foreign affairs, having been inspired by authors like Noam Chomsky. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

Featured image: OKH commander Field Marshal Walther von Brauchitsch and Hitler study maps during the early days of Hitler's Russian Campaign (Source: Publica Domain)

The original source of this article is Global Research
Copyright © Shane Quinn, Global Research, 2018

Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page

Become a Member of Global Research

Articles by: Shane Quinn

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca

www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca