

Nazi Germany Set to Invade Russia, Analysing Hitler's Access to Oil Sources

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On 3 June 1941 a meeting of the Soviet Supreme Military Council was chaired in Moscow. Its goal was to ratify instructions for the Red Army's political workers, which would stress the need for vigilance and caution against the growing Nazi threat.

When Joseph Stalin's close associate, the Soviet politician Georgy Malenkov, read the paperwork regarding this conference he dismissed it by saying, “The document is formulated in primitive terms, as though we were going to war tomorrow”. (1)

War was in fact just over two weeks away, and there was every need for Russian preparations to proceed at a frantic pace. Nevertheless, Stalin supported Malenkov's stance, and the directive for gearing towards imminent conflict was not issued. One of the clearest indications, that Stalin was not preparing for war in 1941, can be seen in the following: On 6 June 1941, Stalin sanctioned a comprehensive strategy for an unrushed transfer of Soviet industry to military production.

The American journalist Harrison E. Salisbury, who spent extensive time in Russia, wrote of Stalin's war policy, “This timetable called for completion of the plan by the end of 1942! It was an excellent, detailed schedule, calling for the conversion of large numbers of civilian plants to military purposes, and the construction of much-needed defense facilities”. The relaxed pace at which Stalin wanted to achieve a transformation to a full war economy, reveals his lack of immediate concern about Adolf Hitler's intentions. The Soviet foreign minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, remembered Stalin saying shortly after Germany had routed France, “we would be able to confront the Germans on an equal basis only by 1943”. (2)

After 1 June 1941 Soviet personnel continued to arrive in Germany for holiday breaks, bringing with them their wives and children. The Soviet embassy in Berlin noticed a worrying development. On the Unter den Linden boulevard in central Berlin was located the studio of Hitler's personal photographer, Heinrich Hoffmann. In the display window of Hoffmann's business, he previously placed maps of European theatres, where the Germans were going to wage war.

In the spring of 1940 Hoffmann erected maps of the Netherlands and Scandinavia in his front window; in April 1941 charts of Yugoslavia and Greece featured; in late May 1941, a

great map of the western USSR appeared, including Belorussia, the Ukraine and the Baltic states. (3)

On the same day (6 June 1941) that Stalin ratified his war plan, the Soviet leader received a report from the NKGB, Russia's intelligence service. The NKGB evaluation calculated that four million German soldiers were now amassed along the Soviet frontiers, in preparation for Operation Barbarossa. (4)

Also on 6 June, the Wehrmacht replaced their guards near Soviet borders with field troops. The Germans put military directors in charge of all hospitals. An estimated 200 Axis troop trains every day were passing through Nazi-dominated central Europe, and arriving beside the Ukrainian or Polish boundaries. The noise of German and Axis vehicles was such that local residents had difficulty sleeping at night.

It was at this time that SS First Lieutenant Otto Skorzeny was transferred to the Eastern front by rail, along with the rest of his unit. Skorzeny later recalled, "Our Das Reich division therefore spent several weeks working exclusively to put our rolling stock in working order and, at the beginning of June 1941, we received the order to entrain the division. After we had driven around Bohemia-Moravia, our train reached Upper Silesia and finally Poland. Where were we going? We had no idea and gave our imaginations free reign... None of us came up with the idea that we might attack Russia, and so have to fight on two fronts". (5)

In mitigation to Stalin, not all of the Nazi divisions themselves were aware of Hitler's design to invade Russia. Yet the Germans could not shield from Russian eyes masses of their soldiers, whose lines stretched across the horizon for miles. Along the crucial River Bug frontier in eastern Poland, where the Soviet 4th Army was stationed, more than 40 German divisions were sighted by 5 June 1941.

After Winston Churchill's failed earlier efforts to convince Stalin of a German invasion, on 10 June 1941 – just 12 days before the Germans attacked – the British again warned Moscow. Alexander Cadogan, British Permanent Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, invited to his office Ivan Maisky, the Soviet Ambassador to Britain. Cadogan told Maisky, "Take a piece of paper and write down what I'm going to dictate". Cadogan thereupon stated in detail the identity and positioning of German divisions beside the Soviet borders (6). Maisky was alarmed at hearing this and sent the data by urgent cipher to Moscow.

Three days later on 13 June 1941 a report from TASS, the Russian news agency, brushed aside rumours of a German-Soviet war, claiming it to be a British provocation. Stalin was unshakeable in his belief that reports of a Nazi invasion in 1941 were a British trick, to sow trouble between Germany and Russia.

In mid-June 1941 Stalin stressed to General Georgy Zhukov, "Germany is involved up to its ears in the war in the west, and I believe Hitler will not risk creating a second front for himself by attacking the Soviet Union". (7)

Altogether, 600,000 German oil-guzzling motor vehicles were being prepared to roll eastwards on Hitler's order. From where did resource-poor Germany obtain the quantities of oil necessary, so as to launch the largest military operation in history? To begin with briefly, in 1938 the Nazis domestically produced around 3 million tons of oil; 2.5 million of which was synthetically created; and the other 0.5 million or so from natural extraction on German terrain (8); such as the oil present at Nienhagen and Rietberg in the northern half of

Germany.

From 1936 to 1939, synthetic oil production in Germany almost doubled (9). As the Germans attacked western Poland on 1 September 1939, there were 14 synthetic hydrogenation plants churning out oil at full capacity in the Reich, and another six being built. With the German annexation of Austria, on 12 March 1938, came oil rich areas which the Germans quickly exploited – like the newly discovered Prinzendorf field in the Vienna Basin. After 1938, the Austrian part of the Nazi empire was by itself producing almost 900,000 tons of oil a year. (10)

In early October 1938, Germany had annexed the Sudetenland part of Czechoslovakia, which held restricted oil reserves but was more plentiful in other mineral resources. Richard Overy, the English historian, wrote how “the Sudeten areas contained rich deposits of lignite, or brown coal, which was far more suitable for synthetic production” (11). The German takeover of the Sudetenland boosted their ability to create oil from hydrogenation processes.

The Wehrmacht’s advance into Poland ensured, furthermore, that Germany had access to oil rich parts of that country, such as at the town of Jaslo. The capturing of Polish territory like Jaslo provided the Nazis with “a substantial amount of petroleum, and almost immediately replaced the oil reserves which Germany had expended to take Poland”, the US historian Arnold Krammer wrote, who often focused on German history (12). The following spring and summer, of 1940, saw swift Nazi victories secured against Denmark, Norway, France and the Low Countries, which did not put an intolerable strain on Berlin’s fuel stocks.

In December 1939, Hitler had reached an important agreement with Romania. They consented to export on average 130,000 tons of oil each month to Germany, in return for Nazi arms sales. Just prior to the German conquest of western and northern Europe, from 6 March 1940 Romania’s oil shipments to Germany increased further; 200,000 tons of Ploesti oil was funnelled to the Reich, in both March and April 1940, as noted by the Romanian academic Gavriil Preda. (13)

A grateful Hitler sold heavy weaponry in return to Bucharest. The Romanians were worried about possible Russian encroachment, which that summer would materialise in Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia; but the latter territory had belonged to the Russian Empire for a century until World War I.

By the beginning of 1940, oil consumption for the civilian population in Germany was dramatically scaled back, to benefit the Wehrmacht. Non-military German oil use had burnt up around 200,000 tons monthly, but in early 1940 civilian oil usage had dropped to 71,000 tons (14). This policy was saving the Nazis over 100,000 tons of oil a month, not inconsiderable. The German defeat of France, in June 1940, guaranteed them the wells of Pechelbronn, in the province of Alsace in eastern France. From July 1941, the Alsace fields provided the Reich with between 60,000 to 65,000 tons of oil annually, a small amount. (15)

With Romania joining the German-led Axis alliance on 23 November 1940, deliveries of Romanian oil to the Nazis grew substantially again, under their new autocratic leader Ion Antonescu. In 1941 the Ploesti wells produced 5.5 million tons of oil and in 1942 another 5.7 million tons; of these totals, Antonescu supplied the Germans from 1941 with about 3 million tons per annum of refined Romanian oil (16). According to professor Clifford E. Singer, of the

University of Illinois, the Wehrmacht consumed “an average of 4.6 million tons of oil per year for 1941-1943”. (17)

Hungary’s decision to join the Axis, on 20 November 1940, allowed the Germans to exploit the oil resources of Nagykanizsa, in the far west of Hungary. During 1940 the Hungarian wells yielded an insignificant 231,000 tons of oil, but under German technical expertise this output sharply increased. In 1944 Hungary produced 809,000 tons of oil (18). Almost all of this went to the German war machine, and Hungary’s oil remained in Nazi hands almost to war’s end. Hitler’s last large-scale offensive, Operation Spring Awakening, was concerned partly with having continued control over the Hungarian oil fields.

Through the 1930s, and into the 1940s, around 150 companies from America engaged in various business deals with the Nazis, an incredibly high number (19). Some of these were among the largest corporations in existence such as Standard Oil, Texaco, General Motors and the Ford Motor Company.

Standard Oil, in co-operation with General Motors, furnished the Nazis in 1935 with the vital tetraethyl lead formula. It was a substance which greatly improved the performance of German oil expending engines, notably Luftwaffe aircraft. In pursuing its Blitzkrieg warfare, Nazi Germany was reliant on acquiring rubber, synthetic and natural. Standard Oil was also heavily implicated in the supplying of synthetic rubber to the Nazis, the butyl rubber process, via Standard’s operations with IG Farben, the infamous German chemical conglomerate. (20)

Through the Nazi-Soviet Pact’s terms, Russia was obliged among other things to dispense with thousands of tons of natural rubber to Germany. In one month alone, April 1941, Stalin sent 4,000 tons of raw rubber to the Reich across Siberia (21). Stalin further allowed the Germans to trade with the Middle East and further afield.

In mid-1940, Stalin agreed that 15,000 tons of rubber from India be transported across Soviet land, along the Trans-Siberian Railway, ending up in Germany (22). The Soviets supplied Berlin too with significant deliveries of iron ore, scrap metal, pig iron, etc. The German historian Heinrich Schwendemann realised, “By the summer of 1940, the Soviet Union had become the most important supplier of raw materials to the Third Reich”.

Russian deliveries of oil to Germany up to June 1941 amounted to at least 900,000 tons. The English military author, Antony Beevor, puts the number at more than 2 million tons of Soviet oil shipped to the Nazis (23). The 2 million-plus figure does seem excessive, however, and the 900,000 total is the more commonly cited.

In the summer of 1940, Hitler outlined that the German need for Soviet oil was “most pressing” and the Reich’s oil levels “will not become critical as long as Romania and Russia continue their supplies, and hydrogenation plants can be adequately protected against air attacks”. (24)

Nothing is said by Hitler here of American oil deliveries to the Reich, yet in the 1930s and early 1940s the Germans did receive some shipments of oil from US transnationals, with America then being the earth’s biggest oil producing country by far. It includes Standard Oil, Texaco and Phillips Petroleum operations with Hitler’s Germany, which invariably goes unmentioned by mainstream scholars. US oil supplies to the Nazis sometimes arrived through neutral states, such as Switzerland and Sweden (25). Quite early in the war, on 11

December 1941 Hitler declared hostilities with America which certainly complicated, but did not entirely end, further US business ventures in Germany.

There is a real scarcity of statistics available for public viewing, as to how much American oil the Nazis actually got. Also there are the logistical problems involved, in shipping oil across a vast and turbulent ocean like the Atlantic; notwithstanding that American businessmen owned or had major stakes in subsidiaries based in fascist Europe.

After the Wehrmacht attacked the USSR on 22 June 1941, eastern territories under Nazi occupation opened up other oil sources for the Reich. There were considerable reserves of raw materials in the region of Galicia, which covers parts of western Ukraine and eastern Poland. Galicia fell entirely into German hands during Barbarossa's opening days, and the German-held Galicia refineries had a capacity to produce 390,000 tons of oil a year. (26)

More oil wells were present in Estonia, conquered by German Army Group North in July 1941, and which before the invasion produced a limited 120,000 tons a year of shale oil. Russian troops largely destroyed the Estonian refineries, but they were promptly put back in working order by the Germans. Modest quantities of oil were located in western Ukraine, in the city of Drohobych, which was taken by the Wehrmacht in early July 1941.

Across that fateful year of 1941, Nazi-controlled Europe manufactured about 12 million tons of oil (27). This amount was still not sufficient to sustain Hitler's thousand year Reich, especially with his invasion of Russia stalling and an extended war looming; as seen by the German attempt to capture the Caucasus' giant oil reserves; in particular Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, which during World War II furnished the Soviet Union with 80% of its oil (28). The Baku wells peaked in 1941, providing the Russians that year with an eye-watering 23.5 million tons of oil, approximately double of what was available to the Axis powers in 1941.

German thinking behind their attack on the USSR was not only to destroy Bolshevism, but to gain mastery over the world's second biggest oil producing state at the time.

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Notes

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