

Operation Barbarossa, Nazi Germany's Economic Exploitation of the USSR

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Looking back over an eight decade timespan at the design for Operation Barbarossa, the June 1941 German-led attack on the USSR, its invasion plan betrays a pathological overconfidence. The strategic planning, of advancing across a breadth of many hundreds of miles of terrain, was excessively ambitious to the point of being grotesque.

Barbarossa's intelligence details were also poorly worked out. Nazi estimates on Soviet military capacity were based more on guesswork than reliable information, and this underestimation of the enemy would come back to haunt them.

On 13 May 1941 in preparation for the invasion, Adolf Hitler's close colleague Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel issued an order outlining that, upon capture, all Soviet commissars were to be executed immediately. The commissars were Communist Party officials attached to military units, in order to imbue Red Army troops with Bolshevik principles and loyalty to the Soviet state.

It was because of this that Hitler designated the commissars to be liquidated in their thousands. The order signed, on 13 May, continued that Soviet civilians suspected of committing offences against the Wehrmacht could be shot, on the request of any German officer. Most maliciously of all, it was made clear that German soldiers found perpetrating crimes against non-combatants need not be prosecuted.

Those Wehrmacht officers that did not believe in Nazism, i.e. because they were monarchists or conservatives, could still reprimand German troops for misdeeds if they wished to, and this did occur. One of the most prominent German Army commanders in the early 1940s, Field Marshal Fedor von Bock leading Army Group Center, was an avowed monarchist who disliked Nazism.

The Jewish Virtual Library, overseen by American foreign policy analyst Mitchell Bard, acknowledged that von Bock “privately expressed outrage at the atrocities” committed by SS killing squads on the Eastern front; but the field marshal was “unwilling to take the matter directly to Hitler” though he did send “one of his subordinate officers to lodge the

complaint". The Jewish Virtual Library noted that the crimes committed against Soviet civilians further "outraged many of von Bock's subordinate officers".

This is not to suggest the Wehrmacht, as a whole, was clean in its conduct in the Soviet Union and elsewhere. It was by no means that, which came primarily as a result of staunch Nazis being placed in positions of authority in the German Army; like the Chief-of-Staff Franz Halder and Field Marshal Walter von Reichenau, commander of the German 6th Army.

Among the invasion's goals was flagrant exploitation, looting and annexation. With this in mind, the Nazis established the Economic Office East, which was placed under the authority of Reichsmarshal Hermann Goering, the second most powerful man in the Third Reich. Goering informed Benito Mussolini's son-in-law, Count Galeazzo Ciano, that "This year [1941] between 20 and 30 million persons will die in Russia of hunger. Perhaps it is well that it should be so, for certain nations must be decimated. But even if it were not, nothing can be done about it". Count Ciano, who was the Italian Foreign Minister since 1936, passed on Goering's comments to Mussolini.

More than three weeks after the German attack, Goering wrote on 15 July 1941, "Use of the occupied territories should be made primarily in the food and oil sectors of the economy. Get to Germany as much food and oil as possible – that is the main economic goal of the campaign".

It is still not entirely clear whether the Nazi method of systematizing the plunder and administering the occupied territories (known as Plan Oldenburg) was based on the belief that the Reich required this amount of foodstuffs, with the deaths of millions of Russians and Jews from starvation being a side effect; or whether their desire was the depopulation of the conquered regions, with starvation used as a convenient process for mass murder. Whatever the principal motive, the prospects of Soviet citizens unfortunate enough to fall under Nazi occupation was grim.

The German march onto Russian soil was hardly a new historical occurrence. A generation before, the eastern divisions of the Imperial German Army, commanded by Erich Ludendorff and Paul von Hindenburg, had from late 1914 captured chunks of the Russian Empire's territory; which on that occasion came after the Imperial Russian Army had marched into East Prussia.

German eastern expansion under Ludendorff and Hindenburg was concerned too with conquest, but theirs was more humane than Nazi policy, as it did not descend to the widespread killing of civilians or Jewish populations. Instead, Ludendorff and Hindenburg sought to commandeer livestock and horses, while exploiting "the extensive agricultural and forestry resources for the German war effort", historians Jens Thiel and Christian Westerhoff observed.

Hitler's East Prussian gauleiter Erich Koch, who would be in charge of ruling Nazi-occupied Ukraine, said that, "Our task is to suck from the Ukraine all the goods we can get hold of, without consideration of the feeling or the property of the Ukrainians. Gentlemen: I am expecting from you the utmost severity toward the native population".

The 1941 German invasion force consisted of 136 divisions, which amounted to 3 million men. They were supported at the beginning by over half a million Finnish and Romanian troops, commanded by Gustaf Mannerheim and Ion Antonescu, two experienced career

officers who for differing reasons desired the USSR's destruction. Field Marshal Mannerheim of Finland, a monarchist and more moderate figure than General Antonescu, had never forgiven the Bolsheviks for shooting Tsar Nicholas II and his family on 17 July 1918; Mannerheim wept bitterly when he heard of the Tsar's death, for he was both well acquainted with the Russian monarch and had served under him in the Imperial Russian Army.

Of the 136 Wehrmacht divisions which would attack the USSR on 22 June 1941, a modest 19 of them were panzer divisions and 14 comprised of motor divisions. In all, about 600,000 German motor vehicles would roll to the east, but the Germans deployed up to 750,000 horses in the invasion. It demonstrates that the Wehrmacht was not the ultra-modern, motorized army that Nazi propaganda insisted it was.

Facing the Germans across the border, in the western USSR, were three very large Soviet Army Groups, comprising of 193 equivalent divisions. Fifty-four of these were tank or motor divisions, significantly more than the Germans had. Since 1932, Joseph Stalin spent huge sums in equipping the military with motorized machines and heavy armor. In particular, the Russians possessed a far greater number of tanks than the enemy; but the experience and quality of Soviet tank crews was noticeably inferior to the Germans, who were battle-hardened and well-versed in the Blitzkrieg (Lightning War) style of combat.

There were other serious Russian weaknesses. Stalin's purge of the Red Army high command from May 1937 "affected the development of our armed forces and their combat preparedness", Marshal Georgy Zhukov wrote, the most lauded Russian commander of the 20th century. The purges, though they targeted a minority of the entire Soviet military corps, had inflicted "enormous damage" on "the top echelons of the army command" Zhukov stated. It meant that paralysis was endemic in the Red Army's decision-making apparatus, which would have serious implications around the time of the German invasion.

Hitler's calculations for attacking the USSR were audacious, to put it mildly. The Fuehrer expected to overthrow Stalin's Russia in about 8 weeks, and once that was accomplished, he intended to turn back and finish off Britain. Hitler estimated that he would not really be embroiled in a two-front war and, in this he was right, for now. The British were in no position in 1941 to interfere with the Nazi plan for eastward enlargement.

The German offensive was indeed to be launched across a massive front, but the Schwerpunkt – the heaviest point of the German blow – was to land north of the Pripet Marshes in Soviet Belarus. Here, two formidable forces, Army Group North led by Field Marshal Ritter von Leeb, and Army Group Center led by Field Marshal von Bock, would implement a giant pincers movement against the Soviet armies opposing them. They would then as envisaged continue advancing and take the capital city, Moscow, European Russia's communications hub. This indicates that Hitler had originally assigned Moscow as a primary objective.

Von Leeb's Army Group North comprised of the German 16th Army (commanded by Ernst Busch) and the 18th Army (Georg von Kuechler), supported by four panzer divisions under Colonel-General Erich Hoepner.

Army Group Center was, by some distance, the biggest of the three Army Groups which attacked the USSR. It consisted of the German 2nd Army (Maximilian von Weichs), the 4th Army (Günther von Kluge) and the 9th Army (Adolf Strauss), bolstered by two armored

groups totaling 10 panzer divisions and commanded by Generals Heinz Guderian and Hermann Hoth.

Gerd von Rundstedt's Army Group South was made up of the German 6th Army (Walter von Reichenau), the 17th Army (Carl-Heinrich von Stülpnagel), a German-Romanian Army (Eugen Ritter von Schobert), and supported by four panzer divisions under Colonel-General Ewald von Kleist. Von Rundstedt's Army Group was designated to advance south of the Pripet Marshes.

In doing so, von Rundstedt was expected to move rapidly in conquering eastern Poland and, specifically, to capture the ancient Polish city of Lublin, close to the Ukrainian border. This would provide a launching pad for Army Group South's panzers to thrust into the Ukraine, and take its capital Kiev, the Soviet Union's third largest city with 930,000 inhabitants. Thereafter, von Rundstedt's divisions would be requested to occupy all of the Ukraine, with Hitler wanting that country's resources for pillaging, such as wheat, for it to become "the breadbasket of the Reich", as he put it.

While Hitler gathered his 136 divisions along the Nazi-Soviet frontier, he left 46 divisions behind to guard the rest of mainland Europe. That number does seem excessive and many of those German formations would be left idle. Military historian Donald J. Goodspeed wrote, "Certainly far fewer than 46 divisions could have countered any British initiative on the continent, a possibility that was in any case unlikely".

Although the Soviet Army proved much larger than the Nazis thought, it was unprepared for the attack that was to come. A considerable proportion of the Red Army in June 1941 was positioned too close to the Nazi-Soviet boundary which, since 1939, had been extended across Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and Romania.

The Stalin Line, a series of fortifications constructed from the late 1920s, and which guarded the western USSR's pre-1939 frontiers, had merely been partially dismantled. The new forward defense positions were incomplete by mid-1941. The Soviet military's armored formations had also been broken up, and the tanks allotted to infantry divisions. The latter error was corrected by Stalin as he repositioned the armored divisions, but they were still in the process of entering full working order when the Germans attacked.

Furthermore, Stalin and the Red Army high command believed the focal point of the German assault would fall south of the Pripet Marshes – that is through the Ukraine – whereas the Germans would, as mentioned, strike most heavily north of the Pripet Marshes across Soviet Belarus. The Russian defenses were placed at their strongest in the wrong sector of the front. This misjudgment in part enabled Army Group Center to advance rapidly into the heart of Belarus, where the Red Army was not fortified so strongly.

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[The Stalin Line](#), as a line of Fortified Regions, [Stalin-line.by/en](#)

Featured image: Elements of the German 3rd Panzer Army on the road near Pruzhany, June 1941 (Public Domain)

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