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The Failure of Operation Barbarossa: Truth versus Fiction

A Thesis

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Table of Contents

Introduction	
Ideology	pages 1-2
Preparations For The Invasion	3-12
The Invasion	13-17
Reasons For Barbarossa's Failure	17-28
Conclusions	29-31
Appendix I	32-33
Appendix II	34-35
Bibliography	

As of July 1940, the European phase of what would ultimately become the Second World War had been underway for some ten months. Having defeated Poland, Denmark, Norway, Luxembourg, Holland, Belgium and France in a series of swift, decisive campaigns, Nazi Germany reigned supreme in Europe west of the Soviet Union. Yet, all was not well in the Nazi camp. Despite the enormous military successes won by Germany's armed forces since September 1939, Adolf Hitler faced a strategic dilemma, a strategic dilemma caused by Great Britain's obstinate refusal to make peace.

Ultimately, Hitler--believing that Britain's refusal to come to terms was based, in large part, on the hope that Russia would eventually enter the war as an ally--chose to solve Germany's strategic dilemma with an invasion of the Soviet Union. Codenamed Operation Barbarossa, the German attack on Soviet Russia commenced on 22 June 1941. Achieving complete tactical and strategic surprise, German forces, numbering more than three million men, quickly penetrated Soviet defenses, scored a series of impressive victories, and advanced rapidly into the heart of European Russia. By the beginning of December 1941, German forces had conquered approximately five hundred thousand square miles of territory, had inflicted several million casualties, and sat in position to capture Moscow. In the end, however, a quick, decisive victory over Soviet Russia, which had been the chief strategic objective of Barbarossa, eluded Hitler, the result being a war of attrition that Germany, in retrospect, had little chance of winning.

In the years following the Second World War, numerous German soldiers, officers in particular, who survived Barbarossa spent a considerable amount of time trying to explain why the Wehrmacht failed to achieve victory over Soviet Russia in 1941. These explanations pinpoint, among other things, tactical and strategic mistakes committed by Hitler, the harsh nature of Russia's climate, Soviet numerical superiority, and even the seemingly superhuman nature of the Russian peasant soldier.

In the pages that follow, I will examine Operation Barbarossa and the German failure to win the expected quick, decisive victory in 1941. Special attention will be devoted to German explanations of this defeat and how these explanations have influenced the historiography of Barbarossa and the fighting on the Eastern Front. Finally, I will offer my own analysis of why Hitler's military machine failed in its endeavor to defeat the Soviet Union in 1941.

To fully comprehend Operation Barbarossa, one must first understand that the invasion and conquest of the Soviet Union was part of a foreign policy program, developed by Adolf Hitler, that envisaged a sequence of four wars.¹ The first two of these wars, one against Czechoslovakia and one against France and Great Britain, were designed to secure Germany's southern and western flanks and thereby pave the way for the third conflict, the confrontation with Russia. This conflict in turn was to provide Germany with the continental foundation from which she could embark on her fourth war, a showdown with the United States of America that would end in German world domination.²

For Hitler, the intended war against Russia was to be, first and foremost, a war of territorial conquest that would bring an enormous land area upon which the Nazi regime could resettle ethnic Germans drawn from various parts of Europe. Here, one needs to understand that the Nazi dictator saw Germans and those of Germanic blood as members of a superior race, the so-called Aryan race, which was engaged in a desperate life-and-

¹ Gerhard L. Weinberg, "Germany's War for World Conquest and the Extermination of the Jews," Holocaust and Genocide Studies 34 (Fall 1996): 122.

² Not all historians agree with the world domination interpretation. In general, there exist two schools of thought on Hitler's ultimate foreign policy aims. One school, represented by Hugh Trevor-Roper, Eberhard Jaeckel, and Norman Rich, argues that Hitler's final aim was limited to the conquest of Lebensraum in eastern Europe. The other school, the dominant one, asserts that the Fuehrer harbored global ambitions. Among the most prominent members of the "globalist" interpretation are Andreas Hillgruber, Klaus Hildebrand, Jost Duffler, Jochen Thies, and Gerhard Weinberg. For a thoughtful discussion of the historiographical debate on Hitler's foreign policy, see Ian Kershaw, "Nazi Foreign Policy: Hitler's 'Program' or 'Expansion Without Object'?" in The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation, 2nd ed., (London: Edward Arnold, 1989), pp. 107-130.

death struggle against a whole host of inferior races, with the Jews being by far the most inferior and most dangerous. In Hitler's warped mind, victory in this struggle--and the concomitant survival of civilization--depended, in part, upon the German race having access to a sufficient amount of agriculturally productive living space (Lebensraum).³ Because he perceived, quite inaccurately, that Germans lacked sufficient living space, Hitler concluded that there were no visible alternatives but to conquer the territory needed and to exterminate and/or enslave the indigenous population.⁴ In both Mein Kampf (published in two volumes, 1925 and 1926) and his Zweites Buch (unpublished 1928), the Nazi leader pointed out that the space Germany needed was to be found in eastern Europe, in Russia and her vassal states in particular.⁵

³ Good analyses of Hitler's ideology are to be found in Gerhard L. Weinberg, "The World Through Hitler's Eyes," in Germany, Hitler, and World War II: Essays in Modern German History (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 30-53 and Eberhard Jaeckel, Hitler's World View: A Blue Print For Power (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1972).

⁴ In Hitler's view, population could be adjusted to a given space, or space could be adjusted to the population. Believing the former would lead to racial decay and was the strategy of a racially weak people, the Nazi leader, from the mid-1920s, advocated the adjustment of space to the population: territorial conquest. See Adolf Hitler, Mein Kampf, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), pp. 131-139.

⁵ Hitler, Mein Kampf, pp. 654-655 and Hitler's Secret Book, trans. Salvator Attanasio (New York: Bramhall House, 1961), p. 139.

Planning for the invasion of the Soviet Union began in earnest in the summer of 1940, roughly eleven months before Operation Barbarossa began. The planning process was inaugurated on 31 July, when Hitler, during a meeting at his mountain retreat in Bavaria, announced his intention to attack the Soviet Union in the spring of 1941. The Nazi dictator explained this decision by linking Great Britain's refusal to make peace with hoping that Russia would eventually enter the war as a German ally. Having announced his desire to attack Russia, Hitler ordered the Army High Command (OKH/Oberkommando des Heeres) to work out an operational plan.⁶

The OKH as well as the OKW produced plans which outlined an invasion of the Soviet Union. The OKH plan, produced by the staff of General Erich Marcks, which called for German troops to conduct a campaign along a broad front in four stages. The main push was to be directed towards Moscow. The plan established by the staff of General Marcks established that the final goal, a line from Archangel in the north to Rostov in the south, would require nine to seventeen weeks to accomplish. The navy was to control the Baltic sea lanes, and the air force was to support the army. A parallel OKW (Oberkommando der Wehrmacht/Armed Forces High Command) plan was prepared by Lieutenant Colonel Bernhard von Lossberg that advocated primarily a northern push rather than one against Moscow utilizing two army groups. The recommended course of attack placed the main blow in the North. The major task of the Navy would be to secure

⁶ Charles Burdick and Hans-Adolf Jacobson, *The Halder War Diary 1939-1942* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1988), pp.231-232. Field-Marshal Walther von Brauchitsch began planning for a 1941 campaign against the Soviet Union, prompted by Hitler's comments of 31 July (see pages 244-245 concerning the conference at Hitler's mountain retreat in Bavaria).

naval forces to break out.⁷

Additional planning and war games took place during November and early December. Although Grand Admiral Erich Raeder and others during these months warned Hitler of the dangers of a possible two-front war, he remained committed an attack against the Soviet Union. On December 5, General Halder presented the army plan to the fuhrer. Resembling the previous army studies and drafts, this version proposed three primary thrusts. One directed an advance out of East Prussia toward Leningrad. The second directed an advance from Poland toward Minsk and Smolensk. The third directed an advance from the south toward Kiev. An eventual offensive toward Moscow was also featured. Halder's plan estimated that a total of 105 infantry and 32 armored and motorized infantry divisions would be necessary for conducting the entire operation. While Hitler agreed to the army proposal, he indicated his preference for concentrating on economic goals. The decision as to whether to move directly toward Moscow was left open. The plan was then turned over to the OKW to draft the implementing directive.⁸

On December 18, Hitler signed Directive Number 21.⁹ Generally it conformed to the OKH plan, but there existed an important alteration. Reflecting General von Lossberg's view, Directive 21 provided that German forces were to capture Leningrad and Kronstadt. It should be emphasized that the primary effort of the invasion, as stated in Directive No. 21, was the destruction of the bulk of the Red Army by "deep penetrating

⁷ Barry A. Leach, *German Strategy Against Russia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p.255.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ See Appendix I.

armored spearheads" from the north, center and south. This first, decisive stage was expected to take eight to ten weeks. The remaining Russian soldiers were then to be pursued relentlessly. During the second stage, besides taking Moscow, German formations were to seize the economically important Donets River basin in the south. The final objective was a line stretching from the Volga River to Archangel. The area to the east, especially the Ural industrial complex, was expected to be neutralized by the German Air Force. Finnish and Rumanian units, plus other Allies later, were to assist in the north and the south. Preparations for the operation were to be concluded by May 15.¹⁰

On 22 January 1941, OKH issued a deployment directive of its own.¹¹ The following is a description in detail of the deployment OKH set forth concerning the invasion of Russia.

Army Group South was to drive its strong left wing with mobile forces in the lead towards Kiev, destroy the Russian forces in Galicia and in west Ukraine while they were still west of the Dnieper, and achieve the early capture of the Dnieper crossings at and below Kiev for the continuation of operations on both sides of the river. The operation was to be conducted so that the mobile formations from the Lublin area would be concentrated for the breakthrough towards Kiev. The 11th Army was to protect the area of Rumania vital to the German war economy against any attempted Russian counteroffensive. The 17th Army was to break through the enemy border defenses

¹⁰ Alan F. Wilt, **War from the Top** (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), p.156

¹¹ Nuernberg Military Tribunals, **Trials of War Criminals** (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1951) Vol.X, Case 12, pp.960-964.

northwest of Lemberg (Lvov) and reach the area of Vinnitsa-Berditchev. The 6th Army was to break through the enemy front on both sides of Luck in cooperation with elements of Panzer Group I and proceed to Zhitomir.¹²

Army Group Center was to annihilate and encircle the enemy in White Russia by driving forward the strong forces on its wings. It was to win the area around Smolensk and achieve cooperation between its mobile troops and Army Group North. This cooperation was the prerequisite for the destruction of the enemy forces fighting in the Baltic states and the Leningrad area. Panzer Group 2 was charged with the responsibility of preventing the concentration of enemy forces in the upper Dnieper region. Panzer Group 3, in cooperation with the 9th Army, was to meet Panzer Group 2 and achieve the destruction of the enemy forces between Bialystok and Minsk. Also, it was to prevent the concentration of enemy forces in the upper Dvina region. The 4th Army was to cross the Bug River and thereby open the way to Minsk for Panzer Group 2 and protect its southern flanks. Ultimately, the 4th Army was to reach the Dnieper. The 9th Army in cooperation with Panzer Group 3 was to break through the enemy forces west and north of Grodno, drive towards Lida-Vilna, establish contact with the 4th Army and destroy the enemy in the area between Bilaystok and Minsk.¹³

Army Group North was to destroy enemy forces in the Baltic area and deprive the Russian fleet of its bases by occupying the Baltic harbors including Leningrad and Kronstadt. It was to break through the enemy front with its main effort towards Dvinsk,

¹² Leach, *German Strategy Against Russia*, pp.263-269.

¹³ *Ibid.*

thrust across the Dvina, and prevent the withdrawal of Russian forces eastward from the Baltic region. It was also to achieve the conditions for a further swift drive towards Leningrad. Panzer Group 4 was to break through the enemy front between Wystiter Lake and the Tilsit-Shaulen highway. It was then to thrust to the Dvina at and below Dvinsk and establish bridgeheads across the river. The 16th Army in cooperation with Panzer Group 4 was to break through the enemy with its main effort on both sides of the road Ebenrode-Kovno, reach the north bank of the Dvina, and reach the Optschka area as soon as possible. The 18th Army was to break through the enemy on its sector with its main concentration on and east of the Tilsit-Riga highway, and was to destroy the enemy forces southwest of Riga by thrusting most of its forces over the Dvina at and below Stockmannshof.¹⁴

The task of the Luftwaffe was to eliminate as far as possible all interference by the Russian Air Force and to support the main operations of Army Groups Center and South. During the main operations the Luftwaffe was to concentrate its efforts against the Red enemy Air Force and in immediate support of the Army. The Navy was to prevent enemy naval forces from breaking out of the Baltic. After the elimination of the Russian fleet, the Navy was to safeguard sea traffic in the Baltic and the supply of the north wing of the Army.¹⁵

On 17 March 1941, the December directive was altered to reflect changes in the northern and southern portions of the operation. The Eleventh Army, rather than

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

undertake a sweeping movement out of Romania, was now merely to tie down the enemy in that area. The remainder of German forces concentrated in the western part of Europe were to be sent to the eastern part.¹⁶

The second area of preparation for the invasion of Russia was the economic one. The invasion was, after all, designed to seize vast agricultural land for future settlement by German farmers. This involved the eventual displacement of those currently living in the area to be occupied, but in the interim there existed the prospect of endless loot and ruthless exploitation. At the Nazi Party rally on 12 September 1936, Hitler asserted that the ores of the Urals, the forests of Siberia, and the wheat fields of the Ukraine could provide all Germans with a life of plenty. The seizure of food would cause famine in the rest of Russia, but the death of millions of Russians from starvation was perceived as an advantage, not a disaster. The mines of the Don and Donets basins and the forests of northern Russia would serve as fine substitutes for the riches of the Urals and Siberia of which Hitler had spoken of earlier.¹⁷

German planners had originally set May 15 as the earliest possible execution date for Barbarossa, but several unanticipated problems forced the Germans to postpone the inauguration of hostilities. The main logistical difficulties, due to the weather, were the difficulty of getting ready and the lack of equipment from the Reich. On April 30, Hitler met with his advisers and established June 22 as attack day. Throughout the planning process, the military leadership did not protest. They shared with Hitler the conviction

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World At Arms* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 189-190.

that the Wehrmacht would defeat the Soviets soundly in a swift battle of annihilation.¹⁸

The Germans possessed an inferior intelligence corps and had very little accurate intelligence. They would not be dissuaded by those whose estimates of Soviet strength were more perceptive, primarily because the prejudices against the Slavic peoples were reinforced by the euphoria of victory in the West. Having practically no agents inside the Soviet Union, except for those actually working for Moscow and feeding them disinformation, the Germans could add to their knowledge only by two other methods: signals intelligence and overflight. Their signals intelligence never penetrated higher-level Soviet codes and therefore, although useful for tactical details, never provided any major insights.¹⁹

The Germans accepted that the Soviets would ally with the British once Barbarossa began. However, Hitler and his military leaders saw this as inconsequential, believing that the Wehrmacht would crush the USSR before Britain could provide any aid. During the spring, Stalin received warnings from a variety of sources that a German attack was imminent. Prime Minister Winston Churchill (through Ultra intercepts) informed Stalin of a possible German attack.²⁰ The United States as well, through its intelligence gathering network, informed Stalin more than once prior to 22 June 1941 that the Germans were planning to attack. The Soviet dictator set aside these warnings, along with information from his own intelligence services. As it turned out, Stalin did not exclude the possibility

¹⁸ Wilt, *War From the Top*, p.157.

¹⁹ Weinberg, *A World At Arms*, p. 189.

²⁰ Ultra was the British intelligence gathering agency during the Second World War.

of an invasion but expected Germany to make peace overtures toward Britain. Stalin also saw the German military buildup as an attempt at blackmail.²¹

At the beginning the opposing forces were relatively equal. The 152 German combat divisions included 19 panzer divisions (plus 3 brigades), 14 motorized infantry units, 111 infantry units, 1 cavalry force and 2 mountain divisions. Added to this number were 14 Rumanian and 21 Finnish divisions ready to enter the battle (other allies were to furnish troops soon after the fighting commenced). The German forces included 3,350 tanks (281 Panzer I's, 743 Panzer II's, 808 35-ton Czech and 38-ton models, 979 III's and 444 IV's).²² In addition, the Wehrmacht had 7,184 artillery pieces, 600,000 motor vehicles, and 625,000 horses. Of the 2,713 German aircraft, 2,080 were in service on June 22. Approximately 1,200 were bombers, 750 were fighter aircraft, and 130 reconnaissance aircraft. German allies (Italy, Finland, Romania, Hungary, Croatia, and Slovakia) contributed an additional 900 aircraft to the Axis cause.²³

Each army group possessed forces and equipment deemed appropriate for the respective missions(s). There were 28 divisions under the command of Field Marshal Wilhelm von Leeb's Army Group North. Six of these were the armored and motorized divisions of General Erich Hoepner's Panzer Group 4. In Field Marshal Fedor von Bock's Army Group Center were 50 divisions, with an equivalent of 10 armored and 6 motorized divisions. General Gerd von Rundstedt's Army Group South consisted of 40

²¹ Barton Whaley, *Codeword Barbarossa* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1973), p. 155.

²² See Appendix II.

²³ Wilt, *War From the Top*, p. 158

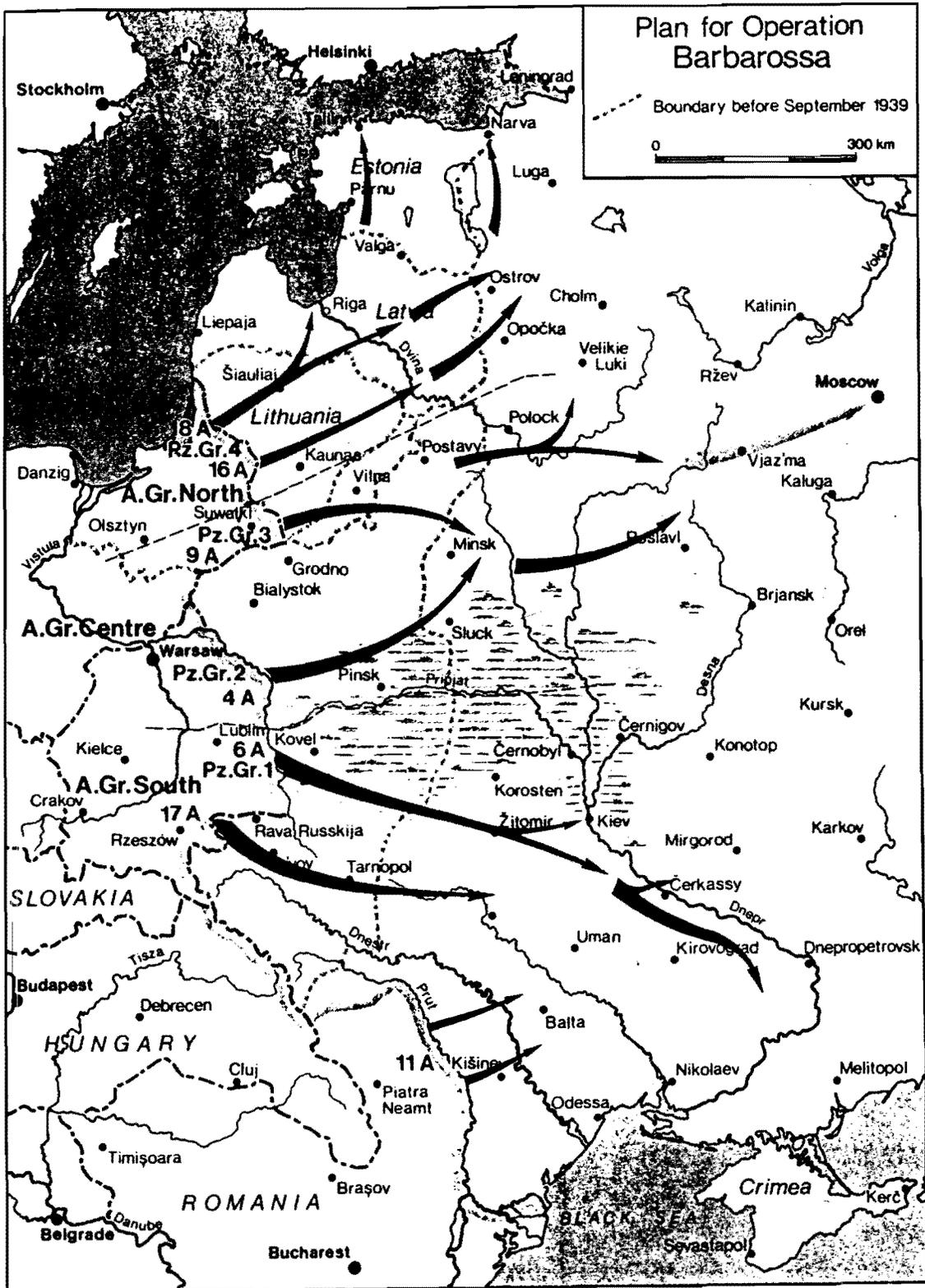
divisions including 6 armored and 3 motorized divisions in Field Marshal Ewald von Kleist's Panzer Group I. Thirty divisions were held in reserve. The infantry commanders of the various armies included a number of famous generals such as George von Kuchler, Ernst Busch, Adolf Strauss, Gunther von Kluge, Maximilian von Weichs, and Walter von Reichenau. Providing air support for Army Group North was General Alfred Keller's Air Fleet I with 593 aircraft. Supporting the crucial Army Group Center was Field Marshal Albert Kesserling's Air Fleet II with 1,367 aircraft. Assisting Army Group South was General Alexander Lohr's Air Fleet IV with 887 aircraft. Air Fleet V was to handle special assignments in the north.²⁴ As for the navy, its forces were concentrating on the "Battle of the Atlantic" and thus its activities in the Baltic were to be limited primarily to defense and supply duties.²⁵

²⁴ War Department, **Handbook On German Military Forces** (Washington, D.C., 17 December 1941), pp. 9-10, 89-91.

A typical German division consisted of 14,952 enlisted men, 493 officers, 356 motorcycles and 1,040 motor vehicles. Each German division was broken down into regiments consisting of a headquarters regiment, a signal section regiment, motorcycle section, an infantry howitzer company, an antitank company, a light infantry column, three battalions (battalion, rifle company and machine-gun company). The German armored divisions (Panzer divisions) consisted of 515 officers and 10,347 enlisted men. The armored division was organized into three echelons: a reconnaissance echelon consisting of a motorized reconnaissance battalion, a tank echelon consisting of a tank brigade with 429 tanks, and an infantry echelon consisting of a mixed motorized command of all arms. The Germans were reported to have a minimum of twenty-five armored divisions in September 1941. The German motorized divisions included about 14,000 officers and men each. Each motorized division consisted of a motorized reconnaissance battalion, three motorized regiments, an antitank battalion, an anti-aircraft battalion, divisional artillery, a pioneer battalion, a signal battalion, a medical battalion and divisional trains.

²⁵ Wilt, **War From The Top**, p.158.

The planning and deployment for Operation Barbarossa were conducted on a large scale. The chief objective of Barbarossa was the destruction of the Soviet field forces. Hitler made it clear in late 1940 that Moscow was not all that important. From his perspective, the annihilation of Soviet field forces, not the capture of Moscow, guaranteed victory. This would produce a chain reaction culminating in a complete collapse, according to the fuehrer.



Map 4

The attack on the Soviet Union commenced in the early hours of 22 June 1941. Although there had been last-minute alerts to Soviet units on some sectors of the front, the Germans achieved almost complete tactical and strategic surprise.²⁶ In the opening part of the invasion, German Army Group North with three armies struck into the Baltic States, overran Lithuania in a few days, crossed the river Dvina at several places and controlled most of Latvia by the end of the first week of July. On the Central front, essentially a region between the Baltic States and the Pripet Marshes, Army Group Center with four armies smashed through the Soviet defenses and seized the eastern Polish territories annexed by the Soviet Union in 1939 in the first two weeks of fighting. Army Group South with three armies (in addition to the 11th army) drove across the southern part of pre-war Polish territories into the pre-1939 Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.²⁷

Army Group North assigned Panzer Group Hoepner the mission of seizing bridgeheads across the Dvina in order to reach Leningrad. The 8th Panzer Division, part of the 56th Panzer Corps, seized the road and rail bridges over the Dvina River within the first few days of the invasion. The 41st Panzer Corps then advanced further in the Soviet Union until it engaged in a major tank battle at Rossenie, encircling the Soviet heavy tanks and annihilating them. By 26 June, the 8th Panzer Division had crossed the Dvina, seized the city of Dvinsk and enlarged the resulting bridgehead to the north. Hoepner placed his forces on the Luga River near Porietscheje, only 110 kilometers from Leningrad. By early

²⁶ Alan F. Clark, *Barbarossa* (New York, William Morrow and Company, 1985), p.44.

²⁷ Weinberg, *A World At Arms*, pp. 264-265. The 11th Army was not attached to Army Group South.

September 1941, Army Group North had encircled Leningrad and besieged the city.²⁸

Army Group South faced numerically superior Soviet forces and encountered fierce resistance. Consequently, Rundstedt's units advanced slowly and became entangled in a fierce battle with the Soviet 8th Armored Corps at Dubno. The Germans decimated the Soviet forces, broke through the enemy positions east of Polonnofe and pushed through to Berdichev. Rundstedt then struck with the bulk of Panzer Group I at Belaya Tserkov and continued to push southeasterly towards Kiev. Ultimately, at the end of July, Army Group South fought and won a great encirclement battle at Uman, a victory that led to the disorderly retreat of the Soviet field armies across the Dnieper, away from Kiev (the main target for Army Group South). In mid-September, Army Group South encircled Kiev, taking over 665,000 Soviet prisoners. With this, German forces now occupied the whole Eastern Ukraine as well as large portions of Crimea.²⁹

Of the three German army groups involved in Barbarossa, von Bock's Army Group Center enjoyed the most spectacular successes in the initial stages of the invasion. This army group then swept into central Russia, grabbed another 300,000 prisoners and seized Minsk and Smolensk by late July. By the end of September, General Heinz Guderian captured Glukov and Orel. By early October German tank units had encircled the Rzhev-Viazma defense line and captured Kaluga, as well as Kalinin, a few days later. Mozhaisk, 50 miles from Moscow, fell on October 18. The Germans then closed in on Moscow

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 51-54. For a further discussion of the siege of Leningrad, refer to Harrison Salisbury's book, **The Siege of Leningrad**.

²⁹ Alexander Werth, **Russia At War** (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1964), pp. 206-207.

from all directions. The battle of Moscow, codenamed Operation Typhoon was now launched. By October 20th, Moscow proclaimed a state of siege.³⁰

As German forces moved toward Moscow, Stalin placed Marshal Georgi Zhukov in charge of the city's defense. Zhukov established reserve units around the suburbs of Moscow in the event a counteroffensive was launched.³¹ When the Soviets gained a numerical tank superiority, as a result of the German 4th Panzer Division being destroyed at Mtsensk, these Soviet reserve units launched a series of counteroffensives that, along with the weather, decimated and demoralized the German troops. The Germans ceased their offensive in early November to decide what they should do next.³²

The Germans decided to launch another offensive on Moscow with what remained of the German army. By this time however, Zhukov had more than doubled his strength. The Germans broke into Lin north of Moscow and in the west to Istra (the point nearest to Moscow they ever reached in force). Due to logistical problems and the cold, the Germans began to lose the military initiative. At the beginning of November the Russians had started an offensive against Leeb's positions in the Tikhvin-Volkhov bulge. Guderian attacked Tula but was ferociously repelled by Soviet forces. The Soviet 4th and 52nd armies reopened the Leningrad-Tikhvin-Moscow railway and staged an offensive that prevented the reinforcement of Army Group Center. Guderian's offensive against the

³⁰ Ibid., p. 230.

³¹ Zhukov had begun planning a major counteroffensive to launch against the Germans when the time was right. However, it took several weeks for this plan to get approved by Stalin.

³² Clark, *Barbarossa*, pp. 159-61.

Zaraisk-Mikhailov line and Ryazan railway was halted. Kleist was ejected from Rostov in the south by fresh Soviet armies.³³

By November 30, Zhukov received final approval from Stalin for the winter counteroffensive that had been in the planning stages for several weeks. On the 5th of December, Zhukov launched a major counteroffensive against Hoepner's, Kluge's and Guderian's armies around Moscow. All three of these armies lost contact with each other. The Germans position became fragmented. By the 6th of December the German drive in the Soviet Union in 1941 came to a halt.³⁴

³³ Ibid., pp. 168-177.

³⁴ Ibid., 260.

Operation Barbarossa's failure has been a topic of debate for more than fifty years. Various members of the German High Command, who survived the war, were interviewed immediately after the conclusion of the war in Europe in 1945. In these interviews, each general gave his own opinion as to why the Wehrmacht failed to achieve a decisive victory in the USSR in 1941. Many of the German generals, including Rundstedt, Kleist, Blumentritt and Manstein, cited factors ranging from logistical/strategic problems, weather and Hitler himself. What is important to remember is that these generals blamed everyone but themselves when stating why the invasion failed.

One of the first questions asked was what effect the Balkan campaign had on Barbarossa. Did the Balkan campaign cause a vital delay in its launching? The invasion of Russia had been postponed from May 1941 until 22 June 1941, resulting in a change in strategy. Field Marshal von Kleist stated, "the forces employed in the Balkans were not large compared with our total strength, but the proportion of tanks employed there was high. The bulk of the tanks that came under me for the offensive against the Russian front in Southern Poland had taken part in the Balkan offensive, and needed overhaul, while their crews needed a rest."³⁵ Field Marshal von Rundstedt agreed that this delay, in combination with the weather, hampered the preparations of his army group. The views of Field Marshals von Rundstedt and von Kleist were naturally conditioned by the extent to which the offensive on their front depended on the return of these armored divisions. Other generals attached less importance to the effect of the Balkan campaign. For example, they emphasized that the main role in the offensive against Russia remained

³⁵ B.H. Liddell Hart, *The German Generals Talk* (New York, William Morrow & Co., 1948), p. 169.

allotted to Field Marshal von Bock's Army Group Center and that the chances of victory principally turned on its progress, not the delay in the invasion itself.

However, after further study, the decisive factor in the change of the invasion timing happened as a result of the coup d'etat in Yugoslavia on 27 March 1941.

Yugoslavia had just committed to a pact with the Axis powers. Hitler became so incensed by the upsetting news that he ordered an invasion of Yugoslavia. The additional forces, land and air, required for the invasion of Russia required a greater commitment than the Greek campaign alone needed. Thus, Hitler decided to take his fuller and more fateful decision to put off the intended start of the attack on Russia.³⁶ In essence, according to Field Marshals von Kleist and von Rundstedt, Hitler's poor decision making represents another factor in the downfall of the German armies in Russia.

The next question asked about the invasion was why it failed. Field Marshal Ewald von Kleist pointed to the weather, Russian strategy and the Russian ability to produce reserves. For example, he stated, "The main cause of our failure can be blamed on the early winter of 1941, coupled with the way the Russians repeatedly gave ground rather than let themselves be drawn into a decisive battle such as we were seeking. But long before winter came the chances had been diminished owing to the repeated delays in the advance that were caused by bad roads and mud. The 'black earth' of the Ukraine could be turned into mud by ten minutes rain, stopping all movement until it dried. That became a heavy handicap in a race with time. Russia also lacked railways, we were unable to bring up supplies to our advancing troops. The Russians received continual

³⁶ Ibid., p. 170.

reinforcements from their back areas, as they fell back. It seemed to us that as soon as we defeated one force, a fresh one arrived to take its place."³⁷

General Gunther Blumentritt endorsed Kleist's view, except for the point about the Russians yielding ground. "On the Moscow route", Blumentritt stated, "the principal line of advance, they repeatedly held on long enough to be encircled. The badness of the roads became our worst handicap. Faulty intelligence had underestimated Soviet strength. The restoration of railway traffic became delayed by the change of gauge beyond the Russian frontier. The supply problem in the Russian campaign became a very serious problem, complicated by local conditions." ³⁸

Another factor stated by Field Marshal von Kleist emphasized that the Germans lacked the definite advantage in the air they had enjoyed in their 1940 invasion of the West. He stated, "At several stages in the advance my panzer forces were handicapped through lack of cover overhead, due to fighter airfields being too far back. Moreover, such air superiority as we enjoyed during the opening months remained local rather than general. We owed it to the superior skill of our airmen, not to a superiority in numbers."³⁹ As German forces pushed deeper and deeper into Russia, the Luftwaffe could not stretch its air cover.

Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, one of the ablest German commanders, gave two reasons why the invasion failed. First, and foremost, he blamed Hitler for

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 175-176.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 176.

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 176-177.

underrating the resources of the Soviet Union and the fighting qualities of the Red Army. Manstein also went on to state that Hitler's strategic policy, which was the demolition of the Soviet system quickly, and his political actions were diametrically opposed to each other. This, in turn, prevented Hitler from winning the quick, decisive victory he envisioned. Second, Manstein argued that Hitler failed to achieve a uniform strategic policy between himself and the OKH. The Barbarossa Directive laid down the general intention of the operation (destroy the Soviet Army in a quick, decisive victory). However, according to Manstein, this was nothing more than a strategic or tactical formula. For example, he pointed to the halt at Smolensk as a change in the strategic objective. Furthermore, Manstein stated that a debate over the basic strategy around July 1941 ensued. The OKH wanted to drive towards Moscow while Hitler was interested in seizing territory that he believed would cripple the Soviet war economy. It was this tug-of-war over territorial objectives that prevented the victory in the summer of 1941.⁴⁰

General Heinz Guderian, Commander of Panzer Group III (Army Group Center), stated that the delay of the invasion of Russia until the summer of 1941, as a result of the Balkan campaign. Far more significant for Guderian was the underestimation of the Russians as enemies. Hitler attached little importance to the reports of Russian strength as compared to the reports of Russian industry. Hitler had convinced the OKH and OKW that a quick, decisive victory was inevitable for Germany. As a result, no provisions were made for the distribution of winter clothing. Another reason cited by Guderian was the issuing of an order by the OKW. This order stated that excessive abuses committed

⁴⁰ Erich von Manstein, *Lost Victories* (Chicago, Henry Regnery Company, 1958), pp.175-178.

against Russian peasants and prisoners by German soldiers would not fall under military law violations. The soldiers responsible would be dealt with at the discretion of their unit commander. Military discipline was threatened with a complete breakdown as a result of this order. Guderian also made reference to the widening gulf between Hitler's opinion and the OKW concerning strategic objectives. For example, a conference at Novy Brissov was nothing more than a debate between Hitler and the German army concerning the strategic plan. Was it going to be Moscow or the industrial area around Leningrad? Guderian and General Hoth advocated a primary thrust towards Moscow. Hitler wanted the primary thrust to be against the industrial area around Leningrad.⁴¹

One important thing to remember is when these generals gave their explanations, they were on trial for their lives in Nuernberg. They were not going to incriminate themselves in any way, shape or form. Of course they tended to blame Hitler, the weather, lack of supplies, etc. A majority of the testimonies given by these high ranking officers were given for self-serving interests. First hand accounts are not always accurate, especially when there is nobody to contradict these people.

Western historians, who have written about Barbarossa, have clearly been influenced by German explanations. Michael Cherniavsky, in his article "**Barbarossa**", cited two important reasons why the invasion failed: Russian qualities and Hitler's mistakes. Russian qualities are three in number: the Russian climate, inexhaustible manpower reserves which overwhelm the Germans and the primitiveness of Russian communications. Hitler initiated a two-front war by his attack against Russia; he

⁴¹ Heinz Guderian, **Panzer Leader** (New York, Ballantine Books, 1957), pp. 124-126, 137, 153.

postponed the opening of the campaign from May to June in order to dispose of the Balkans, and this delay, coupled with the onset of a particularly severe winter, prevented the German Army from finishing the destruction of the Soviet forces. The Russians were viewed to be subhuman in the eyes of German forces. They lived off the land and had inexhaustible manpower reserves that overwhelmed the Germans. The Russian winter was another reason cited by German first-hand accounts.⁴²

Barry Leach, author of **German Strategy Against Russia**, was influenced greatly by the first hand accounts given by the Germans at the close of the war. He stated the underestimation of size and fighting spirit of the Soviet forces and the quality of their new equipment, especially tanks and aircraft, confronted the Wehrmacht with unexpected difficulties. By the third week of July the combat strength of the Panzer and motorized divisions had fallen to about 60% of normal in Army Group Center. In some of the Panzer divisions of Army Group South it dropped to 40%. Early in July, Halder calculated that by the end of the month only 431 tanks would be available from the OKH reserve and current production to replace those destroyed or broken down out of the original total of 3350. But to make matters worse, Hitler gave orders that new tanks should be kept in Germany for equipping fresh Panzer divisions for use in the offensives planned for 1942 in the Middle East.⁴³

Alan Wilt, author of **War From The Top**, was another historian who was

⁴² Michael Cherniavsky, **The Yale Review: A National Quarterly** (New Haven: Yale University Press, June 1962), vol LI No.4, pp.548-554.

⁴³ Leach, **German Strategy Against Russia**, p. 203.

influenced by these first hand accounts. The reasons were a combination of German errors and Soviet fortitude. Germany seriously underestimated their Russian enemy. They had underestimated the tank and infantry strength of the Soviet armies. Furthermore, despite the campaign's overriding importance, the Germans were simply not prepared for the personnel and equipment losses they suffered. German resources as well as their productive capacity were insufficient to overcome the attrition, maintenance and repair difficulties brought on by Barbarossa.⁴⁴

R.H.S Stolfi, author of **Hitler's Panzers East**, is another historian whose explanations concerning Barbarossa's failure mirror those of the German generals. He puts the blame for Barbarossa's failure at Hitler's feet. He stated that Hitler lost sight of the strategic purpose of the invasion which was the destruction of the Soviet Army in a quick, decisive manner. He was more interested in economic objectives rather than strategic ones. For example, Stolfi refers to the decision of the July-August conference in 1941 as the decisive event.⁴⁵

As you can see there are striking similarities between the accounts given by German generals shortly after the conclusion of World War II and the explanations offered by Western historians. Historians such as Leach, Wilt, Stolfi and Cherniavsky were all influenced in their writing by the general's explanations. Each group of explanations blamed the failure of Barbarossa on Hitler, the War in the Balkans, the early onset of winter and the strategic debate between Hitler and the OKW concerning where the primary

⁴⁴ Wilt, **War From the Top**, p. 162-164.

⁴⁵ R.H.S. Stolfi, **Hitler's Panzers East** (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1991), pp.202-212.

thrust of the invasion should be directed. It is this debate that has spurred a reexamination of the failure of Barbarossa for accuracy and validity.

Williamson Murray, the author of "**Barbarossa**", argues that the German military deserves a big share of the responsibility for Germany's failure to defeat Russia in 1941. He points out that German commanders endorsed Hitler's disastrous strategic and political approach in every respect. Hitler failed to set clear goals for the invasion. He involved the Wehrmacht in a great spring campaign in the Balkans that seemingly delays the start of Barbarossa, by as much as five weeks. After the invasion of Russia began, he temporized for much of August as to what the next stage of the campaign should be. He overruled the army and diverted substantial forces from the central area of the invasion for a drive into the Ukraine in September.⁴⁶

The racial ideology the Nazi's possessed concerning the Soviet people proved extremely disastrous for the Germans. By 1941 Stalin had killed millions of Soviet citizens; millions more remained in NKVD (secret police) slave-labor camps, where the inmates were starved, beaten, and/or starved to death. The horror of Hitler's invasion policies, the callousness of German troops in their ideological crusade, and the extent of Nazi atrocities guaranteed that Soviet resistance would not crumble. The Soviet people had to choose between the lesser of two evils: Hitler or Stalin. The Soviet people decided to support "Papa Stalin."⁴⁷

Other factors in the German defeat sprang directly from the operational and logistic

⁴⁶ Williamson Murray, "Barbarossa," *The Quarterly Journal of Military History*, no. 4 (New York, MHQ Inc., 1992), p. 9.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

assumptions upon which the German military planned Barbarossa. OKH planning originally targeted Moscow as the objective of the campaign, which Franz Halder, chief of the general staff, and the most senior generals believed would guarantee the final breakdown of the Soviet regime. Hitler, however, argued in a series of conferences in December 1940 that, for economic and political reasons, the most important strategic targets were Leningrad and the Ukraine. From this point on, Halder left unstated what the strategic objectives of the campaign should be after the initial destruction of the Red Army in the border area (Halder gave into Hitler). Instead, the OKH merely laid out the first stage of the advance, leaving the continuation of the campaign up in the air.⁴⁸

The greatest flaw in the preparations for Barbarossa was logistical in nature. German planners calculated that after an advance of 600 kilometers, movement forward would have to halt for a considerable period of time to allow for resupply and the establishment of new forward supply dumps. However, German troops crossed the frontier with only a basic load of ammunition. Given the rapid advance of German forces, ammunition and fuel were in desperately short supply from Barbarossa's earliest days. German troops had to obtain food and fodder from the Russian and Ukrainian peasants, further damaging relations with conquered population. Finally, the whole resupply effort depended on the repair of Soviet railroads, particularly the Smolensk-to-Brest Litovsk line. But since railroad tracks were generally secured well after the roads, repair work began only after considerable delays. As a result, railroad troops were given the lowest priority

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 11.

in the German army.⁴⁹

By the end of July, German operations came to a grinding halt. The lead elements, the panzer and motorized infantry divisions, ran out of fuel and ammunition. Restrictions had to be put on the number of shells that artillery units could fire. On the primitive roads with their heat, dust, and deep glutinous mud when it rained, the German logistic system began to fall apart. By July 11, after just nineteen days, 25% of German supply vehicles permanently broke down. The panzer divisions could not repair damaged tanks and other vehicles because parts could not get through. The panzer and motorized infantry divisions became dangerously exposed as a result. Soviet reserve forces arrived in increasing numbers. These counterattacks exacerbated the dangerous German shortage of ammunition. In turn, the need for ammunition placed a further strain on the diminishing number of supply vehicles, which drastically curtailed the Germans' ability to supply fuel to the front.⁵⁰

During August a lot of squabbling took place within the German high command, in particular between Hitler and the OKW on one hand and the OKH and the front commanders on the other. The former argued that the German army, rather than push eastward broadly, should focus its efforts on the Ukraine, to the south, and on Leningrad, to the north. Hitler emphasized his belief that Moscow held little significance either politically or economically. But the OKH and the front commanders strongly advocated a resumption of the advance on Moscow. There were other serious quarrels within the

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 11-14.

senior leadership over tactical and operational issues, particularly over the number of Soviet troops escaping from the encirclements, but all of this squabbling seemed more a symptom of German troubles than a cause of them.⁵¹

The weather problem closed in on the Germans almost immediately. In conditions of unimaginable misery, in a sea of mud, the German advance stopped. This reprieve gave the Red Army the time it needed to concentrate its few reserves in front of Moscow. The Germans' persistence in spite of the season underlined the weaknesses of their military system. The exclusive concentration on operational concerns, on winning the next battle, to the exclusion of other vital ones created the preconditions for the coming defeat. In a discussion with chiefs of staff of Army Group Center, General Halder hoped for six weeks without snow, to allow German troops to reach Vologda, Stalingrad and Maikop.⁵²

In November the cold weather arrived. The fact that it froze up the glutinous mud returned some movement to the battlefield. But at the same time, the lack of winter-weight oils and winter clothing, and shortages in every other area, created a nightmare for German troops struggling forward. At times the cold became so intense that the troops started gasoline fires under their tanks to warm up the oil sufficiently so that the engines could turn over. (The Soviet units were better prepared with lightweight oil.) On the night of December 4, the temperature fell to 25 degrees below zero Fahrenheit; one regiment suffered 300 frostbite casualties. In these hopeless conditions, the advance halted at the gates of Moscow. The next day, the Soviet Army shifted to a counter offensive and the

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 14.

⁵² Ibid.

53 Ibid.

entire German front fell apart.⁵³

On the basis of the evidence I have examined, it is my view that Nazi Germany failed to achieve a quick, decisive victory in the Soviet Union primarily because of poor logistical preparation and strategic indecisiveness. The logistical preparations made on Germany's part were optimistic to say the least. The German supply lines were ill-equipped to handle an invasion of this magnitude. These lines could only support German forces for a 600 kilometer push into Russia. After that, the Soviet railroad would be the main supply carrier. However, the Soviet railroad could not handle the supply effort either. The Soviet railroads had a wider gauge than lines in Western Europe. As German tanks were destroyed in battle or damaged beyond repair, there were no replacement parts available. With panzer units only fighting at 50% capacity, the Soviet chances for victory increased greatly on all fronts.

The strategic dilemma faced by the German High Command proved to be one of the most important factors leading to the failure of Operation Barbarossa. Directive No.21 stated that the primary objective of Barbarossa was the destruction of the Soviet Army. During the first six weeks of the invasion, German forces conquered a huge amount of territory. However, by mid-July 1941, Hitler and all of his advisors were meeting to decide where the primary effort of the invasion should be directed...Moscow or Leningrad? The OKW advised that the primary thrust should be made against Moscow. However, Hitler disagreed and advised a primary thrust towards Leningrad. This is where I feel they lost the war. Hitler was no longer committed to the primary goal of the campaign stated in Directive No. 21, which was the destruction of the Soviet Army. Deciding the course of the war as it unfolds is a clear indication of failure.

From the research I conducted concerning the German explanations of why Barbarossa failed, I can only conclude that the explanations were self-serving. Most of the explanations given do not relate to why the invasion failed as a whole. The cold weather, the Balkan campaign and the subhuman nature of the Soviets did not doom the operation altogether. The cold weather was one of the factors that prevented German forces from taking Moscow, but not a factor that prevented the Germans from destroying the Soviet Army. Even if Barbarossa had started in May there is no evidence that the Red Army could have been destroyed. Furthermore, the Soviet's subhuman nature, as described by German accounts, could not have sealed Barbarossa's failure.

Could the Soviet Union be defeated in a quick, decisive campaign of several months duration at the most? I do believe that this could be achieved with the appropriate planning. First, Germany would have to set clear strategic goals and stick to them. Second, Germany would have to find a way to resupply their forces deep within the Soviet Union. Third, a continuous flow of supplies would have to be maintained.

The next question I want to deal with is the whole idea of a quick, decisive victory and what led Hitler to decide this was possible. He believed that the Soviets were subhuman and incapable of beating the mighty German Army. It did not matter to Hitler just how many divisions the Russians could muster, an inferior people can always beat a weaker enemy. Plus, the purges of the Soviet Army in the 1930's had disrupted the military structure in Russia. With this in his favor, he believed that the Soviet Army could be destroyed in a quick, decisive campaign. I believe that Hitler's ideology did not allow him to see the possibility of failure. Hitler's belief in a quick, decisive victory

against the Soviet Army with little regard for concrete strategic goals implies a man out of touch with reality.

Appendix I

"Directive No. 21 stated that the German Wehrmacht must be prepared to crush Soviet Russia in a quick campaign (Operation Barbarossa) even before the conclusion of the war against England. For this purpose the Army will have to employ all available units, with the reservation that the occupied territories must be secured against surprises. For the Luftwaffe it will be a matter of releasing such strong forces for the Eastern campaign in support of the Army that a quick completion of the ground operations can be counted on and that damage to eastern German territory by enemy air attacks will be as slight as possible. This concentration of the main effort in the east is limited by the requirement that the entire combat and armament area dominated by us must remain adequately protected against enemy air attacks and that the offensive operations against England, particularly against her supply lines, must not be permitted to break down. The main effort of the Navy will remain unequivocally directed against England, even during an Eastern campaign. I shall order the concentration against Soviet Russia possibly eight weeks before the intended beginning of operations. Preparations requiring more time to get under way are to be started now, if this has not yet been done, and are to be completed by 15 May 1941. It is of decisive importance, however, that the intention to attack does not become apparent. The preparations of the High Commands are to be made on the following basis:

I. General Purpose

The mass of the Russian Army in western Russia is to be destroyed in daring operations, by driving forward deep armored wedges; and the retreat of units capable of

combat into the vastness of Russian territory is to be prevented. In quick pursuit a line is then to be reached from which the Russian air force objective of the operation is to establish a cover against Asiatic Russia from the general line Volga-Archangel. Then, in case of necessity, the last industrial area left to Russia in the Urals can be eliminated by the Luftwaffe. In the course of these operations the Russian Baltic Sea Fleet will quickly lose its bases and thus will no longer be able to fight. Effective intervention by the Russian Air Force is to be prevented by powerful blows at the beginning of the operation.

II. Probable allies and their tasks

1. On the wings of our operation the active participation of Romania and Finland in the war against Soviet Russia is to be expected. The High Command will in due time arrange and determine in what form the armed forces of the two countries will be placed under German command at the time of their intervention.

2. It will be the task of Romania to support with selected forces the attack of the German southern wing, at least in its beginnings; to pin the enemy down where German forces are not committed; and otherwise to render auxiliary service in the rear area.

3. Finland will cover the concentration of the German North Group (parts of the XXI Group) withdrawn from Norway and will operate jointly with it. Besides, Finland will be assigned the task of eliminating Hango.

4. It may be expected that Swedish railroads and highways will be available for the concentration of the German North Group, from the start of operations at the latest."⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Nuernberg Military Tribunals, *Trials of War Criminals*, p.958-960.

Appendix II

1. The Panzer I tank had five bogie wheels with spokes, the last four being connected by an outside girder bearer. The rear idler wheel was almost on the ground. Two light machine guns were mounted coaxially on roller type mounting. The turret had a rounded back, was on the right-hand side of the tank, and had a very low silhouette.

2. The Panzer II tank had five large bogie wheels, Christie type and four track support rollers. The turret was similar to the Panzer I. It had one heavy machine gun (with a very long barrel) and one light machine gun in roller type mounting. The back of the turret was flat. The tank had a wide track base, very low silhouette and streamlined.

3. The Panzer III tank had six small independent bogie wheels with heavy rubber tires and eight small bogie wheels. There were five large, independently sprung wheels. It was a Christie type tank with three track support rollers. The turret was similar to the Panzer II but had a large door on each side. There was a 37-mm gun and light machine gun mounted in a bulge-shaped mount. Built into the rear of the turret and centrally situated was a small round lookout conning tower.

4. The Panzer IV tank had eight small bogie wheels, four bogies and four track support rollers. The turret was identical to that of the Panzer III tank but with a 75-mm gun. Horizontal engine air louvres were at the rear on each side of the built-up hull.

5. The Panzer V/VI tank was almost covered by an armored skirting with ten small bogie wheels and one independent bogie wheel. It also had four track support rollers. The turret was round at the rear; surmounted by an observation cupola to the rear. There was a massive gun mount, with either a 105-mm gun mounted below a 37-

mm gun, or a 75-mm gun mounted at the side of a 37-mm gun. There were two small auxiliary turrets with one light machine gun each, one forward to the right of the driver and one behind of the main turret on the left.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ War Department, *Handbook on German Military Forces*, p.99.

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