

Last Stand of the Great Bear: Hitler, Stalin, and Operation Barbarossa

By David S. Pipes

What is the power of one man? In times of crises, when the fate of the world hangs in the balance, one man -- one person -- can make all the difference in the world. During the Second World War, when armies of millions were crashing through Europe and the Pacific, the choices made by individuals did more than shape individual destinies. Like the single snowflake, which by its weight determines the course of the avalanche, one life affects others turning the course of history to new and unexpected directions.

On June 22, 1941, Nazi Germany launched an attack on the Soviet Union, an attack which history records as a disastrous turning point in the war. Hundreds of orders and thousands of events shaped *Operation Barbarossa*, but if just one event had unfolded differently -- if Hitler could have changed just one decision -- the winter of 1941 would not have found the German armies encamped on the outskirts of Moscow, but instead it would have found the Soviet capital in German hands and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics smashed into a thousand pieces...

Prologue

On June 14, 1940, the city of Paris, the "glory of France" fell to the German Eighteenth Army. As the swastika was raised over the Eiffel Tower, the French government, which had fled to Bordeaux, collapsed under the pressure of defeat, and a new ministry under Henri Phillippe Pétain asked Hitler for terms. France, which endured the First World War for four years was out of the second in only six weeks. Confident of his imminent success in the west, Hitler now turned his attention to the military operation which he had intended since he wrote *Mein Kampf* -- the utter destruction of the Soviet Union. <1>

While England was still technically in the war, her military forces were in shambles, and she could do little more than wait for a German invasion which would never come. They were a thorn in Hitler's side, but one he was content to let the *Luftwaffe* deal with at their own pace. It was only natural, then, for Hitler to turn his attention to the country he saw as his greatest threat, communist Russia. <2> Though Germany had signed a nonaggression pact with the Soviet Union on August 23, 1939, Hitler never intended to leave her in peace. "This colossal empire in the east," he said in the early 1920s, "is ripe for dissolution." <3>

Hitler's greatest fear was that while he was engaged in a protracted war with France and England, the Soviet Union would take to opportunity to strike Germany from behind. <4> When Stalin took advantage of the war in the West to move into the Baltic states and the Balkans, it appeared as though those fears were about to be realized, because the German war machine required the raw materials from these areas in order to survive. <5>

Germany launched its war of conquest in 1939 with only the thinnest of economic margins. She lacked sufficient food, fuel, and raw materials -- practically everything needed to conduct an extended military campaign. To secure these goods, Germany relied heavily on trade with the two regions which had these materials in abundance -- the Balkans and the Soviet Union -- and in the process left herself vulnerable to having her wartime economy unplugged at the source. <6>

For their part, the Balkans were of little interest to Hitler in and of themselves. He was, however, keenly interested in ensuring the continuous flow of goods from that sector into his country and for that reason promoted peace and political stability in the region. <7> When the Soviet Union occupied the Rumanian provinces of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina in June of 1940, however, they set off Hungarian and Bulgarian demands for Rumanian territory, and in the process threatened the main source of oil for the Third Reich. <8> Following this and other incidents, Hitler came to the conclusion that as long as these areas were granted political independence, there could be no way of assuring the sources of German supplies, <9> and for that reason, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics would have to be removed forever from the realm of Europe.

Operation Barbarossa

Expansion into European Russia had long been a goal of Adolf Hitler. In his book, *Mein Kampf*, he rejected the notion of German expansion to the south and west. The conquest of these areas may have been necessary for national security, but it was to the east that Germany would seek its breathing room. <10> Stalin's attempts to capitalize on Hitler's preoccupation with the war in France, his extremely tight trade agreements with Germany, and what seemed to be his increasingly accommodating attitude toward Great Britain, only served to further alienate the Soviet Union from Germany.

Thus, from the first days of July, 1940, plans were in the works for a military solution to the growing series of problems posed by the Soviet Union. <11> Though Hitler's staff developed multiple plans for the invasion of Russia, Hitler himself laid down the final goals for the Russian invasion, and when England refused to collapse in the summer of 1940, set the date for the attack for May, 1941.

At that time, the main operations would be divided by the Pripet Marshes. The major blow would be delivered north of the swamps with two army groups. One would advance up the Baltic states to Leningrad. The other, farther south, would drive through White Russia and then swing north to join the first group, thus trapping what was left of the Soviet forces trying to retreat from the Baltic. <12> This group, Army Group Center, would be the primary point of attack, and would contain the majority of the German armor. A second major assault would be led by a third army group striking south of the marshes and would drive toward Kiev, accounting for all Russian forces west of the Dnieper River in the Ukraine. <13> Only following the completion of these objectives, which would include the capturing of Leningrad and the Ukraine, would a drive be made on Moscow. <14>

Hitler's ultimate goal was to establish a barrier from Archangel to the Caspian Sea, forever ending Russia's claim on the European continent. <15> He would annex Ukraine, White Russia, and the Baltic States, and he would extend the territory of Finland, who would help in the invasion, to the White Sea. With Russia struck down, Britain impotent, and the United States unwilling to enter the war, the Thousand Year Reich would then be assured. <16>

The Best Laid Plans

Plans for the invasion of Russia moved swiftly as the date laid out by Hitler approached. As is usually the case, however, it was when Hitler was one step from success that the ground fell out from beneath him. As Murphy's Law turned against him, Hitler made decisions and redefined plans which would do far worse than limit the success of Operation Barbarossa, but would help bring about the destruction of everything he had created.

Before Hitler could move on the Soviet Union, he had to make sure that his southern flank was secured. Since he had no military ambitions in the Balkans, Hitler was content to leave the securing of that quarter to his diplomats and the Italians as long as his flow of supplies went uninterrupted. <17> By hook and by crook, one country after another was brought into line until it looked as though the entire Balkan Peninsula would bloodlessly submit to Axis demands.

In October 1940, however, Mussolini launched an ill-fated invasion of Greece from Albania, taking everyone, including Hitler, by surprise. The Greeks, only wanting to protect their homeland, offered fierce resistance and after several months of fighting, drove the Italian armies not only out of Greece, but beyond their original positions in Albania. The British took this opportunity to occupy airfields in Crete and Greece, putting Hitler's Rumanian oil supply within the range of British bombers, and causing Hitler to decide to step in to save his Italian ally. <18>

Though the Germans were surprised by Italy's sudden attack on Greece, they were not unprepared to deal with it or to turn it to their advantage. Hitler had already mobilized massive amounts of troops and material into Rumania in preparation for the Barbarossa operation. It was a simple operation to take a small group, destroy Greece, and be back before the May deadline. <19> In addition, by going to the aid of Italy, it gave Hitler a convenient excuse for his troop's presence. After all, Hitler told Stalin, should the British gain a foot hold, the entire Balkan Peninsula could be destabilized.

As if this were not complication enough, the Yugoslav government that Hitler had just managed to strong arm into line was overthrown on the night of March 25-26, practically a day after joining the Axis powers. This was the last straw. Hitler was going to secure his southern flank even if he had to burn it to the ground. He assembled a massive armored and aerial force to "destroy Yugoslavia militarily and as a nation." <20>

On April 6, Germany attacked Yugoslavia and Greece with overwhelming fierceness. By April 10, a German army of nine divisions, many of them armored, was rolling to Belgrade practically unopposed, which they took on April 13. Though the country would prove easier to conquer than to hold, the shambles of the military and the government surrendered on April 14. Greece proved somewhat more difficult to conquer, but German victories at Salonika and Metsovon Pass ended the threat of the Greek military and the country capitulated on April 22. The British army which had been assisting the Greeks fled south and were finally driven off the mainland by the end of April.

Though Hitler did succeed in pacifying the Balkan peninsula and securing his southern flank for the upcoming invasion of Russia, the cost of the operation was paid in the one commodity Hitler could not afford to waive when preparing for an invasion of the Soviet Union: time. As a result of Hitler's diverting such a massive force to destroy the tiny Balkan country which had dared oppose him, Hitler was forced to delay the start of Operation Barbarossa until the middle of June. His armor needed to be refitted, his men needed rest, and his army needed to be resupplied before any future invasion could be attempted. <21>

These key maintenance tasks were completed as swiftly as possible, and in the early morning hours of June 22, 1941, 6,000 German guns opened up along an 1,800 mile front. <22> The three German armies poured over the border, easily overpowering the surprised border guards and stabbing deep into the Russian frontier. For their part, Stalin and the Soviet High Command were equally as surprised as their border guards -- despite warnings from both the British and their own intelligence forces, they had no idea of what was coming. <23>

During the first hours of the invasion, Soviet forces were hampered by their own lack of preparedness and the absence of orders from Moscow. When these orders did come, four hours after the first Germans crossed the frontier, they were of such naivete and broadness of scope that they could not possibly be fulfilled. One Russian army after another was attacked, surrounded, and annihilated. <24>

Within three weeks of the opening of the campaign, Field Marshal von Bock's Army Group Center had pushed 450 miles from Bialystok to Smolensk. Moscow lay but 200 miles farther east along the high road which Napoleon had taken in 1812. To the north, Field Marshal von Leeb's army group was moving rapidly up through the Baltic states toward Leningrad. To the south, Field Marshal von Rundstedt's army group was advancing on the Dnieper River and Kiev, the capital of the fertile Ukraine which Hitler coveted. <25>

Despite these stunning early victories, Hitler was not accomplishing his primary goal. He was capturing vast amounts of Soviet territory, but the Red Army, while taking horrendous losses was still escaping largely intact from the massive German pincer movements. <26> Also, the German *blitzkrieg* was sweeping through areas so fast that they were not taking the time to conduct adequate mop-up operations. As a result, cut off

Russian soldiers, in some cases intact divisions, were escaping to form the backbone of the Russian resistance. <27>

Hitler knew that if he was to avoid the fate of Napoleon he would have to destroy the fighting power of the Red Army and accomplish his goals before winter. To do this he envisioned huge pincer maneuvers designed to capture and eliminate as many Russian troops as possible. The pincers nearly closed round the Russians near Slonim, but most of them managed to slip out. The Germans tried the tactic again at Minsk, but it fell short of full success, though "masses of Russians" were captured. <28> Near the end of July, a month from the start, a third encirclement was attempted around Smolensk, on a larger scale than ever. Half a million Russians seemed to be trapped, but the Russians once again succeeded in extricating a large part of their forces. The Germans were now 400 miles deep into Russia, and still far from accomplishing their goals. <29>

After three failed attempts to capture the Russian army, Hitler reassessed his strategy. Meeting with von Bock on August 4, 1941, Hitler decided to send portions of Army Group Center to the north and to the south, to aid in the attack on Leningrad and to assist another pincer operation that Army Group South was to attempt near Kiev. <30> Von Bock and other generals protested this action -- the Russian military, which was supposed to be Germany's true target, was moving in and around Moscow. Diverting now would be disastrous.

Hitler could not be dissuaded, however, and Army Group Center's armored divisions were transferred away. The Generals, convinced that a quick thrust to Moscow was the correct course of action, watched in growing concern as the Russians continued to transport in troops and dig in around the Soviet capital. They would have their hands full in a holding action while the fighting in the Soviet Union was carried on in other areas.

Hitler's decision to transfer the major emphasis of the attack south was not without merit. After all, the Ukraine, and beyond that the Caucasus, contained natural resources vital not only to Germany's war economy, but also Russia's. Hitler, however, refused to recognize that the object of war is not to take territory but to defeat the other fellow's military forces. <31>

Despite their concerns, the German generals seemed to be once again proved wrong as the German pincer movement near Kiev resulted in over 600,000 Soviet prisoners. <32> A deeper look, however shows that though Hitler's plan had succeeded in its short term goal, the long term objectives in Russia were forever lost, for it was now the end of September and winter was drawing close.

Hitler was elated after his victory at Kiev, and began assigning new tasks to an army nearing exhaustion. General von Rundstedt and Army Group South was to continue its drive eastward, clearing the Black Sea Coast, and securing a line from Vorenzh to Rostov, to Stalingrad, and then take the Caucasian oil fields. <33> The troops which had been diverted north and south rejoined Army Group Center and it was ordered to continue on to Moscow. Army Group North was ordered to destroy Leningrad and swing

around and aid von Bock in the attack on Moscow. Hitler's division of goals spread an army already getting bogged down in the Autumn rains and pre-Winter storms far too thin, and it was only a matter of time before Hitler's luck ran out.

When von Rundstedt received his orders, he reportedly laughed out loud, they seemed so ludicrous. To accomplish what Hitler planned would entail him extending his flank for over 400 miles and leave himself open to counter attack. Hitler, however, was not concerned with such details. He would bring up Hungarian and Rumanian troops to protect the flanks and that would be that. <34>

Von Bock's army group renewed its drive on Moscow on October 3, but the Russian defenders had taken advantage of the two month break to build up defenses and bring in reinforcements to protect their capital. Still, the Soviets were caught by surprise by the resumption of the German attack— they never expected an attack on Moscow to be launched at such a late date. <35> In the battle of Vyasma, the last great city between Hitler's armies and Moscow, the Germans captured more than 600,000 prisoners, but time was growing very short. It was the end of October, and winter would come early that year. <36>

In Hitler's heated headquarters, the forty miles between the German Army and the Russian capital seemed to be less than nothing, especially next to the 600 miles they had crossed in order to get there. Hitler could not understand what was keeping von Bock's Army Group from victory. He launched one last desperate effort, Operation Typhoon, against Moscow. Everything that could be mustered was thrown against the city. By December 2, a reconnaissance battalion of the 258th Infantry Division had penetrated the Moscow suburbs, within sight of the spires of the Kremlin, but was driven out the next morning by a few Russian tanks and a motley force of hastily mobilized workers from the city's factories. This was the nearest the German troops ever got to Moscow; it was their first and last glimpse of the Kremlin, for the Army was at the limits of its strength. The invincible army of the Nazi Reich had been tested to the limits of its endurance, and it had been found wanting. <37>

On December 6, the Russians launched a counter attack with over 100 divisions along the entire 200 mile front that had been established around Moscow. The German armies, unable to stand up to this assault, faced the same prospects that Napoleon's Grand Army had faced over one hundred years before— annihilation in the snow on the long retreat from Moscow. Hitler stepped in however, and by forbidding any retreat from German positions prevented the rout of the Nazi army. Of course, in the process, he sentenced countless German soldiers to death from either the cold or Russian guns, and the shock of this drastic medicine was almost more than the German military could bear.

Still, come spring, Hitler was able to put together what he thought would be his knock-out punch in the East -- a concerted offensive to take Stalingrad and the Caucasus oil fields. This effort, too, would fail, as the resilience and will of the crippled Red Army brought it from the brink of defeat again and again to turn the tide of the war in the East, and give the invincible Nazi war machine its first loss.

Through the Looking Glass

On March 27, 1941, Hitler learns of the coup in Yugoslavia, potentially threatening his operations in Greece and his upcoming invasion of the Soviet Union. Instead of flying into a furious rage, Hitler calmly considers his options and adopts a wait and see attitude toward the new Yugoslav government. <38> To no one's surprise Yugoslavia only wants to be left alone and is willing to offer its neutrality to Germany.

Incensed at this inconvenience, Hitler considers military action against the small Baltic state, but comes to the conclusion that the primary operation in the Soviet Union must come first. Hitler agrees to these terms, intending to return later to Yugoslavia to make more lasting bonds, and only dispatches a small force to Greece to help Mussolini. This enables him to keep his original deadline of May for the invasion. <39>

There is some concern expressed by the General staff over the condition of rivers and terrain in the days leading up to the invasion, but intelligence shows that an early spring thaw in February had left the frontier passable and the country ripe for conquest. While the small German contingent was running the British down in Greece, the final plans for Operation Barbarossa were completed by the second week of May, 1941.

On May 15, German forces storm across the border, crushing the limited resistance offered by a Red Army that was completely taken by surprise. Stalin, refusing to believe the evidence before him, believes rogue elements are trying to provoke an incident between Russia and Germany. It is only several hours later that the full scope of the invasion is realized. <40>

The momentum of the German attack propels the three Army groups north, south, and east capturing or destroying one Russian army after another. Hitler's planned pincer maneuvers fail, however, as Russian Generals begin trading space for time in an effort to prepare some form of defense.

By the first week of June, von Bock's Army Group Center is on the outskirts of Smolensk, eagerly chewing through the Russian countryside and two thirds of the way to Moscow. Von Leeb's army group is moving rapidly on Leningrad, but the rugged Soviet defenders seem intent on holding the city at all costs. To the south Russian defense has crumbled as Field Marshal von Rundstedt's army group advances on the Dnieper River intent on taking Kiev, the Ukrainian capital. <41>

The Red Army finally gets on its feet around the last week of June, and manages to avoid capture at three separate encounters— Smolim, Minsk, and Smolensk— and though it takes heavy losses, remains intact and capable of fighting the Germans. Hitler, knowing that failure to destroy the Russian army was what doomed Napoleon to failure, begins to rethink the strategy of encirclement.

To the South, von Rundstedt has managed to punch through the Soviet lines and is slanting toward the Black Sea. For a time Hitler considers trying the pincer encirclement

maneuver on this new front, but after meeting with his generals, decides to devote his attention to his true target, the main body of the Russian military, which at this time is forming up for the defense of Moscow.

Moscow is the hub of European Russia's communications and transportation network and has great cultural significance to the Soviet defenders. <42> If it is lost, the Soviet Union's entire military would be plunged into a state of chaos. Stalin brings up his reserve armies from Asia, hoping that a Japanese attack does not soon follow, and orders them to hold the city at all costs.

Von Bock launches Operation Typhoon during the first week of July. It is designed to be a massive armored thrust through the heart of the Russian armies toward Moscow. Within a week another huge pincer movement accounts for 600,000 Russian soldiers between Vyazma and Bryansk, and by July 15, the panzer spearheads were at Mozhaisk, a mere 65 miles from Moscow. Victory is in Hitler's grasp. <43>

In the North, von Leeb and the Finnish army cut off Leningrad and put the city under siege on August 4. In anticipation of the final assault on Moscow, von Leeb is ordered to cut the Murmansk railroad and assist von Bock by attacking Moscow from the north once his operations around Leningrad are completed. In the South, von Rundstedt launches an attack on Kiev on August 7, taking both the city and several hundred thousand prisoners. The key to the Ukraine is now in German hands.

Unwilling to wait for von Leeb, von Bock launches his final assault of the Russian capital on August 8. Workers from the city's factories are mustered for the final defense as the Soviet government flees to the city of Kuibyshev on the Volga River. <44> Though the soldiers and Soviet citizens fight bravely, they cannot hold, and Moscow, capital of the Soviet Union, falls on August 21.

Casualties on both sides are horrendous, but the loss of Moscow hurts the Soviet Union far more deeply. The German army had taken the very heart of European Russia, and though it was waiting for the moment to resupply and rest, it was only a matter of time before they marched again. Stalin, shaken by the loss of his capital, exhorts his soldiers to fight on, pointing to the example of those troops in Leningrad who still hold the city against the Finnish-German armies.

The Soviet Union tries to organize a counter offensive, but morale is low and there is not enough time to bring sufficient forces over from Asiatic Russia. The offensive is quickly broken up as German forces prepare for one more major campaign before winter.

Von Rundstedt receives orders to clear the Black Sea coast and secure a line from Vorenzh to Rostov, to Stalingrad, and then take the Caucasian oil fields. <45> Rundstedt quickly accomplishes these tasks as he runs roughshod over the demoralized Russian army. As winter sets in both Rundstedt and Bock engage in keeping house operations to round up the loose Soviet units in the vast territory they have secured and firm up supply

lines to prepare for the coming spring campaign, where Hitler hopes the final victory in the East will be won.

Stalin withdraws as much of his armed forces as he can in the hopes of saving them for an attack next spring. Reinforcements continue to pour in from Asia and the manufacturing base east of the Urals continue to produce war materials. Though badly damaged, and thanks to the loss of the Caucasus, low on fuel, the Soviet Union is not through yet. Stalin continues to hold up the defenders of Leningrad as an example of bravery and strength, unaware that von Leeb's forces will break through the city's defenses and raze it to the ground during the first week of December, 1941.

Notes

1 William Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the 3rd Reich* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960) 738.

2 Shirer, 797.

3 Quoted in John Strawson, *Hitler as Military Commander* (New York: B. T. Batsford Ltd., 1971; rpt. New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1995) 132.

4 B.H. Liddell Hart, *The German Generals Talk* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1979) 107-8.

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6 Rich, 182.

7 Rich, 181.

8 Rich, 184-6.

9 Rich, 181-2.

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11 Bryan I. Fulgate, *Operation Barbarossa: Strategy and Tactics on the Eastern Front, 1941* (Novato: Presidio Press, 1984) 61.

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22 James P. Duffy, *Hitler Slept Late, and Other Blunders that Cost him the War* (New York: Praeger Books, 1991) 71.

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31 Duffy, 82.

32 Hart, 181.

33 Hart, 182.

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35 Hart, 184-5.

36 Shirer, 851.

37 Shirer, 853.

38 Hart, 170.

39 Hart, 170.

40 Duffy, 72.

41 Shirer, 853.

42 Duffy, 81.

43 Strawson, 140-1.

44 Shirer, 859-860.

45 Hart, 182.

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