

OPERATION BARBAROSSA

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*Nazi Germany's War in the East,
1941–1945*

CHRISTIAN HARTMANN

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IN MEMORY OF MY MOTHER

INGEBORG HARTMANN

—BORN 17.6.1929 IN BERLIN,

GREW UP IN GREIFSWALD,

DIED ON 31.5.2009 IN TÜBINGEN—

WHO TAUGHT ME SO MUCH ABOUT THIS WAR

AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

AND WITH THANKS TO

ANNE MUNDING

WITHOUT WHOM THIS BOOK WOULD NEVER

HAVE BEEN WRITTEN

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The real war will never get in the books.

Walt Whitman (1819–92)

Introduction

Never before or since had there been a war like this one. A war that cost so much blood, with such enormous repercussions, or that etched itself so deeply into the collective memory of its contemporaries as the war that raged between the German Reich and the Soviet Union from 1941 to 1945. History is not short of conflicts both bloody and momentous in their consequences that have seared themselves into the memory of posterity, but there are not many, even among the pivotal conflicts of world history, that are comparable to the German–Soviet War. Everything about it was gargantuan—the numbers deployed, the theatre over which it was fought, and, not least, the numbers of victims that it claimed.

It was a conflict for which it is difficult to name an equivalent, in either its scale or its consequences. The Allied victory in the Second World War obviously stemmed from a variety of causes, and it would naturally be misleading to reduce explanations for the defeat of Hitler’s Germany to a mere handful of factors and events. But it is undeniable that the Soviet Union played a large part, if not the largest part, in that victory. It was there that the Wehrmacht bled itself dry, and was in the East that it first became apparent that Hitler’s deluded and criminal attempt at National Socialist world domination would end in failure. The reverberations were so immense that they continued long after 1945; Operation *Barbarossa* fundamentally changed the map of Europe. Without it, the ethnic reorganization and Sovietization of its eastern half would have been unimaginable. But, above all, it was the ‘Great Patriotic War’ and its millions of dead that turned the Soviet Union into a superpower.

Finally, the way the war was fought was itself extraordinary. It was a fight for existence between the twentieth century’s two great totalitarian movements—and the conduct of both sides was correspondingly extreme. Both Nazi Germany and the Stalinist Soviet Union fought the war as though it were a crusade. The result was an orgy of violence, even if much of the fighting at the front as often as not was of a conventional nature. What was crucial, however, was that a new type of war developed, an increasingly ideological, total war, one that returned almost to its atavistic origins. Moreover, this was neither a peripheral colonial war, nor a civil war fought according to its own set of rules and conventions. It was a pivotal conflict fought between two of Europe’s most cultured and venerable nations. The effects of the new way in which the belligerents looked at both themselves and each other are not to be underestimated. Since 1945, there have been ever more examples of the extent to which modern warfare is characterized by what are generally acknowledged as war crimes—and of the way such crimes have to a degree even come to replace it. It was during the German–Soviet War that much of this behaviour became common practice once more.

And this was no accident—the German leadership wanted it that way. Operation *Barbarossa* was a war of aggression that the Third Reich started out of choice not necessity. It was also—something that would prove even more calamitous—conceived from the very first as an ideological war of ethnic annihilation. That is not to say that the Soviet Union, whose leaders had embarked on the adventure of the Hitler–Stalin Pact in 1939, was completely blameless in radicalizing the way in which the war was waged. It, too, was a totalitarian and deeply criminal regime, and became all the more so when it found itself with its back to the wall. But it remains indisputable that the initiative for the war came

from Germany and that, seen as a whole, the German atrocities during the war weigh significantly more heavily than do the Soviet ones.

These experiences inevitably left a deep impression on the societies that were involved. Even today there are few things as important to the national identity of the post-Soviet nations as the memory of victory over Hitler's Germany. The losers, on the other hand, have distanced themselves fundamentally from the ideas and institutions that made such a war possible. This is not just because the invasion ended in such complete disaster for the invaders. An even greater burden in the long term was the slowly emerging German realization that they had not only sacrificed in vain, but had also fought for something that was so thoroughly evil.

The memory of Operation *Barbarossa* is sure to outlive those who witnessed it. To say this is merely to give an inkling of the forces that it unleashed. But how do we explain it? And why did it even happen in the first place?

Politics 1940–1941

Europe in July 1940

The Second World War seemed to have been decided early—not in May 1945, but after less than a year, in June 1940. A quick glance at the map of Europe would have been enough to suggest that this was the case. The German *Wehrmacht* had literally overrun its opponents—Poland (1 September to 1 October 1939), then Norway and Denmark (9 April to 10 June 1940), and finally France and the Low Countries (10 May to 22 June 1940). Poland and Scandinavia had essentially been a warm-up, but that hardly applied to the German offensive in the West. After the shockingly rapid victory over the combined armies of France, Belgium, and the Netherlands as well as the British Expeditionary Force, the end of the war seemed close at hand. France, the ‘hereditary enemy’ and predominant German fear in the First World War, was conquered and occupied, the British driven back onto their islands. Although it had saved the greater part of its ground forces, at least the soldiers, and had at its disposal one of the world’s strongest navies, a modern air force, and the almost inexhaustible resources of the Commonwealth, the island kingdom was politically isolated for the time being. In summer 1940, Britain was the only one of Hitler’s opponents left, and it appeared to be reeling, militarily as well as psychologically. Otherwise, the European continent itself was almost entirely under German control.

No one had expected this, particularly not in such a short time. Almost precisely twenty-one years previously, on 28 June 1919, Germany seemed to have lost everything and not just the First World War. In the Treaty of Versailles, Germany was forced to admit its sole responsibility for that war (Article 231) and therefore to foot the bill. It was high: loss of around 13 per cent of its territory, reparations to the value of 138 billion Goldmarks (at their value on 21 April 1921), surrender of all colonies and the majority of its merchant fleet, reduction of its Armed Forces to 115,000 men, and much more besides. The Allied conditions were stringent, petty, and directed at a society that in the previous years had lost over two million soldiers and a million civilians to war, hunger, and sickness. However, the ‘Versailles Diktat’—this was the note struck in Germany at the time—did not actually imperil the existence of the German nation, and that was the real problem. The Allied victors had neither destroyed the German Reich nor really made peace with it nor dared to attempt a new beginning with its Weimar leaders. They had instead struck a fateful and dangerous middle way: they had weakened the Reich, humiliated it, and provoked in German society a mindset characterized by deep resentment of the victorious Western powers, by fear of worse, by an emotional hostility to modern civilization, by a widespread longing for ‘national rebirth’, and, ultimately, for revenge. On a basic level, those longings were not nearly as impossible to achieve as they seemed. Austria–Hungary, one of the other great losers in the First World War, had disintegrated into individual states and unification of German Austria with the German Reich, the long-discussed ‘Greater German solution’ to the question of how the Germans were to be politically organized, finally seemed possible. Though that, too, was expressly forbidden by the Treaty of Versailles, at least for the time being.

Another loser in the First World War had been Russia, even though it had fought on the Allied side. It left the war through the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (3 March 1918) because a bloody civil war

had paralysed the country after the February and October revolutions of 1917. Alongside a number of significant differences, there was also a series of striking parallels between the situations of the two empires, the German and the Russian. Both were former great powers that the First World War had left weak, traumatized, and dismantled; both had forms of government that were entirely new to them and both were totally isolated in international politics. It was no coincidence that these two outcasts found their way to each other in the Treaty of Rapallo (16 April 1922). And there was another parallel that first became visible later, after 1933. The military, political, and economic crises had radicalized both Russian and German society to an unprecedented extent, albeit in almost opposite ideological directions. Despite the differences, these two mutually hostile ways of looking at the world had in common that they both offered a future and a salvation, one for race and nation, the other for all humanity. It can in some ways be seen as an antithetical relationship, a tension between right and left that would leave its mark on the interwar period. After 1933, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union made no secret of their deep enmity. But, despite that, a war of anything more than propaganda at first seemed highly unlikely. Between the Soviet Union and Germany lay the 'cordon sanitaire', that world of central European states called into existence after the First World War. The other, more important point was that neither was then militarily or politically anywhere near being able to wage such a war.

The strategic possibilities available to Nazi Germany in 1933 were, in fact, very modest. The horizons of German foreign policy extended only as far as the borders of the Weimar Republic, and its aims were confined to revising the Versailles Peace Treaty, to such ambitions as reuniting the Saarland with the rest of Germany (January 1935), and having the *Wehrmacht* reoccupy the demilitarized Rhineland (March 1936). These were no more than territorial adjustments within the German sphere of power. That changed in 1938. With the untroubled *Anschluss* of Austria in March and the rather more dramatic annexation of the Sudetenland in October, Nazi Germany was able to expand its territory for the first time. Both could be justified by the principle of a people's right to self-determination, as championed by the American President Woodrow Wilson at the end of the First World War. Soon afterwards, however, in March 1939, Hitler demonstrated that he was not thinking of the borders and traditions of Bismarck's Germany when he occupied the so-called rump Czechoslovakia, now administered as the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. This was brutal annexation, and it was also a historical turning point, because now at last the Western powers had to recognize that their politics of soothing and compromise, of 'Appeasement', had failed. Hitler simply ignored the guarantees they made to East European states. When he then tried to cow Poland politically and territorially, he left Britain and France with no choice. The German invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939 was followed two days later by the British and French declarations of war. With that the German Reich had begun something for which its *Führer* had long planned and prepared—the appropriation of *Lebensraum* (living space) by means of war.

In July 1940, this first European stage seemed almost complete. If, however, the map of German conquests up to this date is examined more closely, it rapidly becomes clear how heterogeneous the German power block really was. There were areas occupied by German troops, completely or in part (Bohemia and Moravia, Poland, Denmark, Norway, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, and France), there were allies (the Soviet Union, Italy, Romania, and Hungary after November 1940, Bulgaria after March 1941), friends (Finland, Romania, Spain), and largely dependent states (Slovakia), while the number of neutral powers shrank continually in the period up to summer 1941. After the Balkan campaign and the German–Italian occupation of Yugoslavia and Greece (6 April to 23 April 1941), only a few islands of Europe were spared war and dictatorship: Switzerland, Sweden, Ireland, Portugal, and Turkey, and even they were exposed to the mounting pressure of German foreign politics.

At that point, Nazi Germany had almost all of Europe within its reach, and its military and economic potential was correspondingly large. Opposition hardly existed. Britain's offensive capabilities were exhausted for the time being, and the European resistance movements were yet to organize themselves. The attitude of the occupied European states was mostly one of *l'attentisme*, a careful wait-and-see. For Hitler and his followers, this was the most advantageous position conceivable. In summer 1940, he stood at the zenith of his power, and almost everything seemed to indicate that the enormous risk of starting a war had indeed paid off.

Hitler's ideology and strategy

There are many accounts of how German power came to extend itself so suddenly across Europe—political and military ones, social or historical, and each of them is accurate in its own way. The single most important impulse, however, and that by some distance, came from an individual, Adolf Hitler (1889–1945). Understanding him as the real motor of this development does not mean falling into the trap of biographical reductiveness. Of course, there were many supra-personal tendencies, resentments, and longings bound up in Hitler's character, and, without the obedient or enthusiastic mass of 'national comrades', his thinking would naturally not have had much of an effect on the rest of Europe. But it is also true that by summer 1940 Hitler had manoeuvred himself into a situation in which he, as unchallenged Commander-in-Chief, was as free as he never was before or afterwards to draw the plans for his dream of a great and mighty empire. His power and the opportunities open to him were in every sense tremendous, and correspondingly tremendous was the influence that he as an individual was able to exercise over world politics.

Rarely was this as evident as it was in Operation *Barbarossa*. He had laid the tracks, he alone and in secret, in the well-guarded and prohibited areas of the *Führer* headquarters and residences. Here there were plenty of ideologues, functionaries, or bureaucrats who accepted his decisions, praised them, or even supported them enthusiastically. But how were things seen by the other, 'normal' Germans? Whether they, without their *Führer*, would ever have fallen in for an attack on the Soviet Union is a speculative question, but surely no idle one. Naturally, the ideological potential that was then discharged in the war against the Soviet Union—anti-Bolshevism, anti-Semitism, anti-Slavism, and also a naked imperialism—had all been widespread, though far from uniform, in German society up to summer 1940. But it is entirely questionable whether this ideological saturation would have sufficed for the Germans to plunge themselves like so many lemmings into this homicidal and ultimately suicidal undertaking. Many soldiers certainly had misgivings about it, and when they were informed of the plan decided upon by their Commander-in-Chief a few hours before the assault in the night between 21 and 22 June, they could have guessed that the campaign would be bloody, hard, and ruinous. In the long weeks and months beforehand, they had been transported to the eastern borders of the German empire without having been given even a rough idea of what they were there to do. The official line was that this was a dummy deployment intended to divert attention from the real plan, a seaborne invasion of Great Britain. They knew no more than that, because the decisions about this war, about its goals and the manner in which it would be fought, were all to be made by Hitler.

That is not to say that his decision-making process was not also subject to external pressures. In summer 1940, there were three considerations that were most dangerous for him: Great Britain, the Commonwealth, and Winston Churchill (1874–1965). Churchill had become Prime Minister on 10 May 1940, the day of the German invasion of the West, and it was—in Joachim Fest's masterly formulation—'as though Europe, entangled in the complicity of its agreements with Hitler and deep

defeatist in mood, rediscovered in this man its norms, its language and its will to self-assertion'. Churchill had recognized more quickly and clearly than many of his contemporaries that Nazism not only threatened his country or his continent, but fundamentally threatened the entire contemporary world order. And, like hardly any other statesman before him, Churchill was ready and able to set himself against the apparently invincible German conquerors using all available means, even when that meant placing the entire British Empire on the scales. Above all, it was Churchill's will to resist and the readiness of British society to pursue his policy of 'victory at all costs' that drew the line against which the insatiable German lust for conquest finally foundered. Internationally it was a lonely policy, made without the support of any real allies. In his memoirs, Churchill reduced the title of what would presumably be the decisive chapter of the Second World War to a single word: Alone. It truly was 'the finest hour', and not only for Churchill.

For his German counterpart, this immediately presented a range of concerns, both of power politics and of political ideology. Hitler had always hoped for an alliance between Germany and Great Britain in which the congenial 'Germanic' partners would share world domination by land and sea. But even before 1939, he had eventually to accept that these ideas found only few friends in the British Isles. Equally ineffectual was Hitler's 'appeal for peace' with Great Britain (19 July 1940), and so his understanding of the world left him no other choice but to force this equally hated and admired naval power to surrender. But how? The three approaches that the German strategists adopted in the subsequent weeks—an intensified air war against the British Isles as prelude to their invasion, a comprehensive U-boat war against the British convoys in the Atlantic, and, finally, an intensifying engagement around the Mediterranean—all remained inconclusive. Despite all sacrifices and efforts made up to the end of the year 1940, nothing essential changed in the strategic stalemate of Europe. The initiative was still Germany's. The overwhelming reserves of the Commonwealth, however, combined with, in the long term, those of the USA, indicated that time was not on Germany's side.

Hitler was not prepared to draw any political conclusions from that knowledge. Instead of limiting or ending the war, he wanted to widen it. What he began to tinker with from autumn 1940 onwards, albeit with some hesitation, was not the content but merely the order of his plans. Why not realize his final political goal, the great war of conquest in the East, immediately? Why not decide one stagnating war by means of another? Hitler was well aware that such a radical shift of emphasis in German strategy would present incalculable risks. Until then, the Soviet Union had proved itself a reliable ally and provider of raw materials. Not only that, it covered his back against the danger of a war on two fronts, something by which the German Reich had already been broken in the First World War. But was it not possible that this knot could be chopped with a single blow? What tempted Hitler more and more was the idea of a global blitzkrieg in which each war would nourish the next. If one 'ever really tackles' a colossus like the Soviet Union, Hitler revealed to his military advisers, 'it breaks apart far more quickly than the world would have guessed'. With the help of its new 'Eastern zone'—this was Hitler's vision—Germany would conquer everyone, first Great Britain and then ultimately the USA. It was, as it was called afterwards, a step-by-step plan, each step a step towards German world domination.

At first these were just exercises on the map, naturally top secret. But they soon sufficed to cool relations with the Soviet Union. When foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov, visiting Berlin for the first time on 12 and 13 November 1940, made matters worse by describing the USSR's territorial intentions in Europe—they aimed above all at securing Soviet influence in Scandinavia, the southern Balkans, and the Turkish straits—Hitler understood this as a conclusive signal. His hesitation ended. As soon afterwards as 5 December 1940, he informed his military advisers that the struggle for 'European hegemony' would be decided 'in the fight against the Soviet Union'. Thirteen days later,

he signed his famous directive no. 21. Its first sentence read: 'The German Wehrmacht must be prepared to crush Soviet Russia in a quick campaign even before the end of the war against England.'

The monstrous scheme: a Greater Germanic empire

Hitler's decision to invade the Soviet Union was not solely the result of power politics. His motives were more complex and had a far longer back story. He had wanted this war for a long time and in it he saw the chance totally to annihilate the mortal enemies of Nazism: Bolsheviks, Jews, and Slavs. In this Hitler was returning to his political origins, to the boundless phantasmagorias that he measured, not against the art of the possible, but against the principles of the exorbitant fantasy world he had designed around himself: 'We will stop the endless Germanic migrations towards the south and west of Europe and instead turn our gaze to the land in the east. We will finally leave behind the colonial and mercantile politics of the pre-war era and move on to the territorial politics of the future.'

This extract from Hitler's statement of faith, *Mein Kampf*, demonstrates how early he set his sights on this target. In his politics, however, it had been only vaguely recognizable since then. It was in 1938–9 that his intentions became more distinct. Until that point, the success of Hitler's politics had, after all, been due in large part to letting tactical compromise blur the absolute quality of his ideology and thus bring it into the realm of the practical. But, from now on, utopias and doctrines would carry the day unhindered.



ILLUSTRATION 1. In military commander mode: Hitler and Mussolini on a visit to the Eastern Front,

Its aim was not only annihilation. Because Hitler considered ‘the East’ to be ‘waste and empty’, he wanted to shape it as he saw fit—without any regard either for its past or for the people who were actually living there. It was there that he saw the future of the Germans or indeed the entire ‘Germanic race’. It was as though a malicious child were reorganizing the world: peoples were transplanted, destroyed, resettled, ‘nordicized’, or classified as ‘slave races’, all with complete contempt for whatever cultures or nations that had developed in those territories. Even the history of the twentieth century witnessed hardly anything comparable. What is characteristic of the atmosphere in Nazi Germany is that the *Führer* did not remain alone in all of this. Though these top-secret war games were initially presented only within the circle of power drawn close around the Reich’s headquarters, there were more than enough ‘specialists’ willing to accommodate themselves to Hitler’s ideas or indeed, with horribly apparent eagerness, transform his lunatic schemes into concrete government policy. This was the work less of his entourage than—what is worse—of real professionals: the traditional ministerial bureaucracy, party functionaries, officers of the General Staff, scholars, diplomats, and also some industrialists. On these planners’ maps of the future, the ‘Greater Germanic empire of the German Nation’ would eventually come to stretch from the Atlantic coast all the way to the western foothills of the Urals. Its core would be the Greater German Reich, extended westwards to include significant parts of France and eastwards to swallow Bohemia, Moravia, and all of Poland. The model structure of this empire, however, was to consist not of the vassal states in the West or the Balkans, but of ‘Reich Commissariats’—enormous swathes of Scandinavia and, especially, of the East: the Ukraine, ‘Eastland’ (Belarus and the Baltic states), Moscow, and the Caucasus.



MAP 1. Utopia. The ‘Greater Germanic Reich of the German Nation’

What this meant for the people living there could be read in the General Plan East. Commissioned in 1940 by the head of the SS, Heinrich Himmler, this plan provided the political blueprint for the subsequent German occupation of Eastern Europe. Thirtyone million Slavs, possibly also fifty-one

million (the German planners were generous) Poles, Byelorussians, Ukrainians, and Czechs, were to be driven into Siberia, where they would either be left to their fate or 'scrapped' at once. Only those 'capable of Germanization' and potential slave labourers would be left. Himmler had already let it be known that these 'alien races' would have to learn 'that it is a divine commandment to be obedient to the Germans, as well as honest, hard-working and well-behaved'. They were to serve the occupiers, some five to twelve million 'Germanic settlers', who were to be recruited both within the Reich and around the rest of Europe. With the help of a giant system of thirty-nine large 'defence settlements' and countless 'defence villages' connected to each other by motorways and railways, they were to rule a country that would be shielded from the lands to the East by an enormous wall.

As deranged and amoral as these atrocious plans may seem, they really did form the basis of German politics. If they were never or only incompletely realized, that was by no means because the German leadership did not take them seriously. The problem was rather that the war they initiated developed in a direction quite unlike the one they had originally expected. This presents a central problem in the history of National Socialism. Here historians are dealing with a utopian project whose conversion into reality was stifled in its nascent phase, so much so that in retrospect it is often difficult to make out its true ambitions. Its architects also worked hard after 1945 to play down the extreme nature and inhumanity of their intentions. But it was precisely this plan that was the primary motivation for Operation *Barbarossa*. That the behaviour of the Germans altered under the influence of the war and that there was subsequently a division of responsibilities among the aggressors are matters that belong to a later history. Most important at the outbreak of war were ideology and politics; the well-known maxim that war is only the continuation of politics by other means has seldom seemed so justified as it was in the case of Operation *Barbarossa*.

Stalin's ideology and strategy

Did the Soviet leadership—did, above all, the Soviet dictator Joseph V. Stalin (1878–1953)—have an inkling of what was being prepared in the West? Yes and no. Naturally, the deployment of a million-strong army on the borders of the Soviet Union (and the careful sounding-out by German diplomats of potential allies in an Eastern campaign) could not be kept entirely secret. Up to 22 June 1941, the warnings came time and again. Despite that and despite the ever more numerous indications of a German invasion, Stalin remained dogmatically fixed on the course that he had already set for his foreign policy, a course at that point oriented primarily towards the Non-Aggression Pact with Germany. How do we explain this?

The Soviet Union's foreign policy had been confronted with an unusual conceptual problem from the moment of its birth. The Bolsheviks had decided the Revolution and Civil War (1917–21) in their own favour, but their hope of a global revolution had not been realized. The USSR had remained the only socialist state—sovereign, vast, and with tremendous ideological aims, but weak in influence and isolated from a world that reacted with suspicion and often indeed with outright hostility to this political experiment. In the light of the revolutionary future that the Bolsheviks preached to all other countries, that was not entirely unjustified.



ILLUSTRATION 2. Friends? Signing the Nazi–Soviet Non-Aggression pact in Moscow. First from the right is Molotov, Stalin is third from the right, and fifth from the right is Ribbentrop.

In reality, however, the world revolution was gradually becoming mere rhetoric. Since the end of the 1920s and the consolidation of Stalin's unconditional dictatorship, Soviet foreign policy had begun to alter its approach. The principle of 'socialism in one country' increasingly came to shape the external politics of the Soviet Union. In practical terms, that meant a readoption of power politics in the traditional style and a careful return from international isolation, partly in order—in the Soviet formulation—to loosen the 'encirclement by imperialist powers'. This began through close cooperation with Germany (Treaty of Rapallo, 16 April 1922; Treaty of Berlin, 24 April 1926) and continued in a series of non-aggression pacts with such close neighbours as Turkey (1925), Persia (1927), and Afghanistan (1931), as well as with Finland, Latvia, Estonia, and Poland in 1932. Not long after seizing power, however, in September 1933, Hitler had let it be known internally that the current 'German–Russian relations [were] objectively not sustainable in the long term'. With the signing of the German–Polish non-aggression pact of January 1934, at the very latest, Soviet foreign policy found itself having to adjust. Its new basis was provided by two mutual assistance pacts, with France (2 May 1935) and Czechoslovakia (16 May 1935). This system of collective security was enabled by the Soviet Union's having joined the League of Nations in September 1934 (a year before the exit of Germany and Japan) and by the new strategy of the popular front, which the Comintern, the Communist International in Moscow, announced to the world in 1935.

But how viable was this system really? In the harsh reality of international politics, the Soviet Union remained an outsider. It was unable to do more than react to the political situation that the other powers created. Could its security really be guaranteed with treaties and resolutions? The Sudetenland crisis in autumn 1938 seemed only to justify once again Stalin's almost pathological distrust of the hated capitalist countries. The Western powers had caved in to Hitler, and the Soviet Union, by contrast, had not even been asked to participate in the solution of this international dispute. Was the Soviet Union, after everything, not once again threatened with encirclement by the capitalist states? Would it perhaps even use fascist Germany as a spearhead against the first and only socialist country? That he himself did not make the slightest attempt to rescue his Czechoslovak allies was something that the Soviet dictator studiously failed to notice. What determined his thinking was the belief that the Western powers wanted to embroil his country in a war with Germany, something he soon stated publicly, at the 18th CPSU party conference in March 1939. It was true that, in spring 1939, the international situation was becoming ever more tense; when and between whom the imminent war would break out, however, was something that still remained undetermined. Stalin's

nervousness and fear of betrayal were closely mirrored by the mental state of the crisis's actual instigator, Hitler. It was becoming increasingly apparent to him how isolated Germany would be after its invasion of Poland, something that had been set in stone long ago. Although he and the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini had signed the so-called Pact of Steel amid a great propaganda fanfare on 22 May 1939, German doubts about this alliance were confirmed soon after the outbreak of war in September. Fascist Italy first declared itself 'noncombatant' and decided to join the German side only on 10 June 1940, when the war against France was already as good as over.

But on whom could the German strategists really rely at that point? The only man who might be an answer to that question was Stalin, who, for his part, had in the preceding years never completely ruled out the possibility of an alliance with Germany. Although the ideological contrasts could hardly be starker and although the two tyrants' strategic intentions were entirely contradictory, their short-term interests seemed to complement each other rather well. Hitler wanted his rear secure, at least initially, and Stalin wanted to keep his country out of a general European war, for the time being. After all the twists and turns of international diplomacy, the result, on 23 August 1939, was the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, which immediately turned European politics on its head. The absolutely secret additional protocol, which explicitly and brutally divided Eastern Europe between the two dictatorships, corresponded to one of Stalin's other goals. He wanted to use the opportunities afforded him by the crisis to make territorial gains and so take up in more or less disguised fashion the old hegemonic endeavours of the Tsarist regime, all the while keeping the Soviet Union out of the war. 'The war will be fought between two groups of capitalist states,' Stalin explained in the Kremlin at the start of September 1939. 'We have nothing against it if they batter and weaken each other. It would be no bad thing if Germany were to knock the richest capitalist countries (particularly England) off their feet.'

This plan seemed to be working. As expected, a war broke out between Germany and the Western powers, initially disabling both sides. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union was able to extend its borders westwards bit by bit with no risk of involvement in a truly dangerous conflict. In quick succession Soviet troops occupied eastern Poland (17 September to 6 October 1939), then the three Baltic states (15 and 17 June 1940), and finally the eastern part of Romania—that is, Bessarabia and the northern Bukovina (28 June to 1 July 1940). In the winter campaign against Finland (30 November 1939 to 12 March 1940) the Soviet Union was also eventually able to 'retrieve' the south-eastern part of the country (West Karelia).

It was not only this territorial booty; the shockingly rapid German successes also gave Stalin a good reason not to rock the boat when it came to his powerful ally in the West. That was also the motive for extending the cooperation between the two arch-enemies of yesterday into other areas. On 28 September 1939 came a Boundary and Friendship Treaty, followed, on 11 February 1940 and 10 January 1941, by economic and trade agreements. The enormous supplies delivered by the Soviet Union to the German Reich (in 1940–1 their total value reached more than 618 million Reichsmark, against German goods to the value of 532 million Reichsmark) were indispensable to the latter's war effort. Right up until the last moment, the Soviet goods trains were still rolling into the West. In effect, that meant that, without Soviet oil, the German panzers would hardly have managed to reach the outskirts of Moscow.

Militarily, too, the Soviet side tried to avoid provocation wherever possible. The officers of the German General Staff recognized quite clearly that there were 'no indications of Russian activity directed against us', and, in September 1940, the State Secretary of the Foreign Office, Ernst Freiherr von Weizsäcker, was of the opinion that 'there is no reason to fear that the Russians will attack us'. It is quite evident that the German leadership did not really feel threatened by the Red Army at that

point; as an opponent, it was hardly to be taken seriously. There is, therefore, not the remotest justification for the claims made subsequently, that in Operation *Barbarossa* the *Wehrmacht* had been carrying out a pre-emptive strike so as to anticipate an imminent Soviet invasion. That is not to suggest that Stalin did not pursue imperialist goals that aimed partly at the centre of Europe. They were, however, to be realized *later*, once capitalist Europe had exhausted itself in a new world war. Only then would the Soviet Union 'appear at the last, to throw the decisive weight onto the scales'. That was something Stalin had announced as early as 1925, just at the same point in time when his German antithesis was publishing the first volume of his credo, *Mein Kampf*.

The Eve of War

The invaders

While Stalin continued to place his faith in the complex mechanisms of his foreign–political axioms, the German preparations rolled on undisturbed. By June 1941, the Wehrmacht’s leaders had gathered 3.3 million soldiers on the borders with the Soviet Union. The total number of German soldiers deployed during the course of the war in the East is estimated at around ten million. In other words, it was the largest military force Germany had ever assembled. But it would not be large enough.

The explanation for this is simple. The economic and demographic resources available within the German area of control were simply too small for a war on multiple fronts against a coalition as strong as the Allies. But can the course of a war really be explained with only a handful of statistical comparisons? Military reality is often far more complex. Suffice it to mention only the German campaign in the West and that, in the Soviet Union, too, the *Wehrmacht* was initially triumphant. Why was that?

The majority of the German soldiers believed that the war was for a good cause, at least at first. They were also experienced, hardened, reasonably solidly equipped, well trained, and excellently led at the tactical level; benefiting also from the element of surprise made their initial success secure. These soldiers were used to fighting a land war, something that applied equally to most members of the Luftwaffe, which made up 27 per cent of the invasion force. By contrast, the German Navy was never more than peripheral to the Eastern campaign. Its deployment was restricted to the Baltic and Black Seas.

Although Operation *Barbarossa* was primarily a land war and although this was where the German Armed Forces had felt at home since time immemorial, the war also rapidly exposed the weak links in the *Wehrmacht*’s professionalism. It was in this endurance test that it became apparent how improvised the German forces truly were. They had been shrunk to merely 115,000 men between 1919 and 1933, after which a rearmament programme had begun in which those cadres were divided again and again so as to have their numbers supplemented with hundreds of thousands of conscripts, volunteers, and reactivated veterans of the First World War, all furnished with first German and then increasingly captured military equipment, which, however, proved less and less equal to demand, in both quantity and quality. The result was ultimately a complex conglomerate of units and divisions that differed greatly in professionalism, equipment, and attitudes.

The backbone of the German Eastern Army consisted of the Infantry Divisions, thoroughly capable units of over 17,000 men whose provision with vehicles, anti-tank guns, and heavy weapons was, however, all too limited. Since the Infantry Divisions soon lost their modest pool of vehicles, they marched and fought as in the Napoleonic era—on foot or by horse and cart, with rifles and artillery. The German Eastern Army began Operation *Barbarossa* with 750,000 horses; during the course of the war, the demand for this archaic form of transport grew steadily, along with the concomitant need for carts.

The Eastern Army’s 3,350 panzers and 600,000 motor vehicles (in June 1941) had instead been

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