



Germany's Invasion of Russia, 1941: An Overview

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Abstract

Germany's invasion of Russia was one of the most ambitious operations of the World War 2. Helmed by Adolf Hitler, this Operation was named Operation Barbarossa and began on 22nd June 1941 and lasted for about 6 months before the Germans finally succumbed to both, the Russians and the weather. Germany's primary objective of this invasion was to destroy Soviets, her arch rivals and exploit the Russian territory for the betterment of her people. But, like any other plan, this plan too, had certain flaws. The most important being the discrepancy of opinion between Hitler and his generals regarding the war strategy. Disapproving his generals' ideas, Hitler decided that Leningrad and Kiev, instead of Moscow were important in the context of crushing the Russian morale. This meant the Army Group Centre was completely idle for 2 months and when it was time to fight, the Russian winter had set in which the Germans were not prepared for. Russian army, on the other hand, was well prepared and made an astonishing comeback to push the Germans back.

Keywords

Operation Barbarossa, World War 2, Nazi – Soviet pact, Hitler, Stalin, Red army.

Introduction

For centuries, Germans and Russians had detested each other until they realized that they had to have political and economic relations with each other for various strategic intentions. But deep down, the enmity still persisted. Hitler had always wanted to expand the German empire in the east and even Stalin knew that Hitler was not somebody he could trust. So, when Germany successfully captured France, Hitler began planning for a Soviet invasion. Although Stalin knew this was coming, he did not expect the attack to be so soon. As a result, when Germans actually attacked, the Red army was not prepared. The German Force was divided into three groups with each group assigned a specific task. It was estimated that the successful completion of these tasks would take no more than 10 weeks. Capturing Russia would mean that almost the entire Europe was under Hitler's control and so, he had put up an enormous invasion force against the Soviets.

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On 23 August 1939, a non - aggression treaty was signed between Germany and the Soviet Union in Moscow by their foreign ministers, Joachim von Ribbentrop and Vyacheslav Molotov, respectively. It was therefore known as the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact.¹ This German-Russian pact was a big surprise for the

other European powers, as they knew about the ideological differences and political relations that persisted between the two countries. It was hard to believe for them that centuries of enmity between two powerful nations had suddenly subsided into an alliance. The pact stated that the Soviet Union and Germany would partition Poland if the Germans would ever invade it, and the Soviets would take away the Baltic states and Finland. For the next year and a half, Germany and Russia enjoyed not only political advantages but also economic benefits as the countries entered a trade pact in 1940. This trade pact ensured that the Russians got German military equipment, trade goods while the Germans received raw materials, such as oil and wheat from Russia.² The alliance with the Soviets gifted Hitler the freedom to expand his plans for complete European domination. In May 1940, the German military moved towards France and captured it within six weeks. But, Hitler had always wanted the German empire to expand in the east in order to gain *Lebensraum* or 'living space' for the Germans. So, after successfully capturing France, Hitler began planning for an invasion of the Soviet Union. This plan included the subjugation and enslavement of the racially inferior Slavic communities of the Soviets.³ This was a part of the grand plan of spreading the German population across Europe and eventually the entire globe. Accordingly, Hitler issued an order to invade Russia. The operation was named as 'Operation Barbarossa' and was initiated on 22nd June, 1941. About three and a half million Germans received crucial support from the Axis troops in attacking along a 1,800-mile front. Around 80% of the entire German army was assigned for this enormous task. Seventeen panzer divisions, formed into four Panzer Groups, comprised of a total of 3,400 tanks. Also, there were 2700 aircraft of the Luftwaffe, ready for an aerial attack. It was the largest invasion force till date.⁴ The German forces were divided into three armies and each group was assigned a specific objective. The Army Group North was to move past Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia and capture Leningrad. The Army Group South's objective was to attack the Kiev and the Donbas (Donets Basin) industrial region. Between them was the Army Group Center whose objective was to get Minsk, Smolensk and then the Soviet capital, Moscow. Hitler had expected to achieve all these objectives and thus, conquer Russia in a time span of 10 weeks.

Initially, the German and the Axis troops were swiftly penetrating deep into Russia, and that too with a great pace. By December 1941, the German armies along with the Axis troops⁵ had killed 360,000 Soviet soldiers, and were responsible for one million Russian casualties. To add to the misery, there were two million Soviet soldiers held captive by the Germans. All of this inflicted losses of around 3.4 million on the Red Army by the end of the year. Six months since the commencement of the Operation Barbarossa, German troops and their allies had already managed to advance 600 miles and occupy about 500,000 square miles of Russia. The reason for this was that the panzer groups had started strong and quickly pushed towards their objectives, leaving the Russian troops baffled. They also received great support from Luftwaffe's bombing of Russian airfields and artillery positions.

Army Group North, under Field Marshal Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb, paced quickly towards Leningrad. The Panzer group 4 of General Erich Hoepner was in the lead. Russian forces in this area were unevenly scattered and as a result, faltered in front of the mighty Germans. This helped the Germans as their panzers covered 500 miles within three weeks. Not even a month into the operation, and the Army Group North were already only 60 miles away from Leningrad, their prime objective. Army Group Centre, under Field Marshal Fedor von Bock, was also pacing rapidly towards Moscow. Within a week, Panzer Group 2, led by General Heinz Guderian, and Panzer Group 3, led by General Hermann Hoth had circumvented three Russian armies and captured over 320,000 men. The two panzer groups then pressed ahead and showcased their power again by engaging in another encirclement on 27 July on the far side of Smolensk. Digging deep inside, they trapped two more Russian armies and destroyed them completely within no time. Also there were about 300,000 Russian troops taken as prisoners. Army Group South, under Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, had the toughest challenge amongst the three groups. They were put up against the stiffest Soviet resistance as majority of the Red army was concentrated in this region. But by the initial days of July, the German army had managed to push the Red army beyond the original Polish frontier (before 1939). General Ewald von Kleist's Panzer Group 1 was targeted by Soviet flanking attacks when it was on its way to Kiev, the capital of Ukraine. Kiev was of utmost importance as it was the key to the coal-rich Donets Basin. On 8 August, Army Group South encircled two Russian armies and captured around 100,000 men in the Uman pocket. They also managed to besiege Odessa, a naval port situated on the Black Sea.

Everything was going well up to this point, with the only major problem being the time needed for the infantry to catch up. Months of marching and fighting the war had exhausted and wearied the German army. Army group Centre's supply situation had worsened and become very critical. On learning this, Hitler ordered to stop the advance on Moscow and reinforce Army Group North and Army Group South. Accordingly, Hoth's Panzer Group 3 was sent north to support the attack on Leningrad while Guderian's tanks were ordered to move south to help Army Group South take Kiev. The German High Command were not in agreement with this decision and protested strongly. The panzers stood only 220 miles from Moscow but Hitler regarded that a successful attack in the north would wreck a city named after one of the pillars of Soviet Russia, Vladimir Lenin. Also, attacking the resource-rich Ukraine in the south was really important as it would destroy a huge portion of the Red army and place vital industries as well as agricultural areas in German hands. By late September, strengthened by the additional Panzer Group, Army Group South successfully captured the city of Kiev in the Ukraine, while also holding 650,000 Russian soldiers as prisoners. As Army Group North reached Leningrad, Hitler ordered the place to be destroyed with massive aerial and artillery bombardments. Now, with Leningrad sieged and Ukraine captured, the generals advised Hitler that it was the right time to take Moscow, before the arrival of the deadly Russian winter. Hitler did agree this time, but only partly. He ordered an attack on Moscow, but only

after Army Group North had completed the capture of Leningrad and Army Group South had advanced deeper into southern Russia towards Stalingrad, the city named after the Soviet dictator. This meant that the German troops in Russia would be attacking simultaneously on three major fronts spread over two thousand miles long. This meant their manpower and resources were stretched to the absolute limit.⁶ Meanwhile, German troops holding outside Moscow had been idle for nearly 2 months, waiting for an order to advance. And when the advance finally started on 2nd October 1941, the Russian winter had begun to set in. At first it appeared as though Moscow would be another easy success as two Russian army groups were quickly encircled and destroyed down by motorized Germans, who took 660,000 Soviet prisoners.

Confident that the war in Russia was just about won, Hitler got excited and announced victory to the German people. By mid-October, forward German troops had advanced quickly and were only 40 miles away from Moscow. Only 90,000 Russian soldiers stood between the German forces and Moscow. But then the weather changed drastically. There were autumn rains lasting for weeks, creating battlefields of deep, sticky mud that immobilized anything on wheels. This was a major setback for the German army that relied heavily on their tanks and trucks. The non-stop rain also affected the soldiers as their feet were constantly drenched. November arrived with another surprise as autumn rains abruptly gave way to snow squalls and sub-zero temperatures, causing frostbite and other diseases.⁷ The German Army had planned for a quick victory in Russia and had therefore ignored to prepare for the brutal winter warfare it now encountered. And to make things worse, the winter of 1941-42 was the coldest in decades.⁸ There was a desperate need of heavy boots, overcoats, blankets, etc which were unavailable. This resulted in thousands of frostbitten soldiers dropping out of their frontline units. Food supplies were running out and the troops were becoming malnourished. Mechanical failures arose as tank and truck engines couldn't withstand the cold while iced-up artillery and machine-guns jammed.⁹ The once-mighty German military was now impelled to halt the advance. But, Hitler argued that Moscow could still be taken with all the available troops in Russia by making one final attack for victory. So, on December 1, 1941, German tank groups attacked from the north and south of Moscow while infantrymen paced in through east. This time, Russians were ready and waiting. The weather delays had made sure they had enough time to bring in massive reinforcements and accordingly, they now showed great resistance against the Germans.

On December 6th, a hundred Russian divisions counter-attacked the Germans all along the 200-mile front around Moscow.¹⁰ For the first time in the war, the Germans experienced an attack from Soviets, as number of Russian tanks, planes and artillery tore them apart. By mid-December, German forces around Moscow, cold and terribly exhausted, were in full retreat. Once on the verge of victory, the Germans now had succumbed to the greatest-ever comeback by Russia. By then, about 750,000 German soldiers, were either dead, wounded or missing. In the battlefields of snow around Moscow, Adolf Hitler had suffered his greatest defeat. The German Army would

never be the same. Although the Red Army had experienced greater losses than the Germans, the Germans hadn't been able to achieve victory. The invincible Germans had lost, and Europe was saved from falling into the hands of a cruel dictator.

Conclusion

Hitler and his generals had underestimated the might of the Red Army. Expecting the war to last for a short span of time and only being prepared for that was a huge error of judgment. This, as well as Hitler's decision to halt the Army Group Centre for two months, forced the tremendously exhausted German Army to make an advance in what was, one of the coldest winters of Russia. Also, this gave Stalin ample amount of time to rebuild his army and stand strong against the advancing Germans. Once the Red army had successfully faltered the German advance, Stalin surprised the Germans with a strong counter-attack and hence, successfully pushed the Germans back.

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