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# "The World Will Hold Its Breath": Reinterpreting Operation Barbarossa

R. D. HOOKER, JR.

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"All summer they drove us back through the Ukraine; Smolensk and Vyazma soon fell . . . . By autumn we stood with our backs to the town of Orel."[1]

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On 22 June 1941 the German armed forces crossed the Polish border to begin the largest land battle in history. Six months later, Hitler's exhausted panzers ground to a halt on the outskirts of Moscow itself, never to advance farther in the three and a half years left of the Nazi regime. For more than 50 years, the settled verdict of history has been not merely that the Wehrmacht failed to defeat the Red Army and win the Second World War, but that it *could* not.[2] The conventional wisdom is that German planners grossly miscalculated the task before them, embarking on a mission impossible to achieve and one leading directly to *gotterdammerung* for the German people and dismemberment for the German state.

Yet the truth may be altogether different.[3] Distorted not only by the Allied victory in the west, but also by Russia's eventual, crushing victory in the east, the cold evidence suggests something quite different. In fact, the German army stood on the threshold of a shattering victory in August 1941. Only Hitler's decision to send the panzers of Army Group Center *away* from Moscow and into the Ukraine robbed the Wehrmacht of a victory that would have changed the world for generations. For five decades, a skewed interpretation has led American military thinkers to ignore and denigrate the wellsprings of German military power. The best lessons of World War II may well lie, largely ignored, in the ashes of history.

## The Panzers Advance

At 0330 on 22 June 1941, the German army surged from its Polish and East Prussian assembly areas to rupture Russian defenses all along the invasion front (see Figure 1).





Figure 1. Operation Barbarossa.

Army Groups North and Center advanced north of the vast Pripet Marshes toward Leningrad and Moscow, while Army Group South struck south of the Pripet toward Kiev and the Ukraine. In front of the armored spearheads, the Luftwaffe smashed artillery positions, command posts, and resupply columns on the roads in a spectacular reprise of its performance in France the year before. Everywhere the Soviets were taken by surprise; everywhere the border defenses collapsed.

Sixteen hours after the opening of Operation Barbarossa the German army in the east had virtually unhinged two Soviet fronts, the Northwestern and Western. At the junction, the Soviet 11th Army had been battered to pieces; the left flank of the 8th Army and the right flank of the 3d Army had been similarly laid bare, like flesh stripped from the bone which lay glistening and exposed. The covering armies in the Soviet frontier areas were being skewered apart.[4]

In the north, Field Marshal Ritter von Leeb commanded Army Group North, with two armies (16th and 18th) and Panzer Group 4 (later renamed 4th Panzer Army, consisting of two panzer corps).[5] Four days into the campaign and moving at lightning speed, General Erich von Manstein's 56th Panzer Corps had breached the Dvina, 185 miles from its start point.[6] By mid-July, Von Leeb had largely cleared the Baltic States. Having averaged 18 miles a day, the army group stood only 60 miles from the prize--Leningrad, the former winter capital and cradle of the revolution.

At this point the armored spearheads encountered swamp, marsh, and woodland which greatly restricted their mobility, compounded by Von Leeb's decision to employ the panzer group's two corps (41st and 56th) on separate, widely

dispersed axes. No great encirclements occurred in the north, partly because of the difficult terrain, and partly because of the extreme depth of the Soviet deployment in the Baltic States. On Hitler's orders the panzers were halted to enable the infantry to come up and assist in clearing the dense, wooded terrain. Because of the poor terrain and Hitler's earlier order that Leningrad would be encircled only (not assaulted and occupied), Von Manstein's view was that Panzer Group 4 should be used against Moscow, which he saw as the true center of gravity of the Soviet defense.[7]

Its pace slowed, Army Group North closed upon Leningrad, its main body reaching the outskirts of the city by the end of August. Now began the famous "900 days" siege, of which the Russian people are justly proud. Looking at the campaign as a whole, the significance of operations toward Leningrad at this point was not whether the city would capitulate, but whether as a supporting effort the attack through the Baltics would divert substantial forces away from the defense of Moscow, the true aim. In this, Von Leeb was successful. Despite the imminent danger in the center, Stalin committed two entire "fronts" to the defense of Leningrad, styled the "Northwest Theater" and commanded by his civil war crony Marshal Voroshilov. These forces, composing nine field armies[8] and fighting obstinately if not skillfully, suffered heavy losses as they were driven inside the historic city and encircled.

In the south, Field Marshal Gerd von Runstedt faced the strongest grouping of Soviet forces, arrayed to defend the rich farmlands of the Ukraine and the oil fields of the Caucasus. Army Group South attacked with three field armies and one panzer group, its objective to seize Kiev and advance to the Don and the Crimea.[9] Two weak Romanian armies supported the army group. The Soviet Southwestern and Southern Fronts formed the Southwest Theater under the aging civil war cavalry hero Marshal Budenny, with eight armies.[10] The difference in the south was very strong Soviet tank forces, echeloned in depth. Budenny controlled upwards of 30 armored and motorized formations, twice the number of tank units found opposite Army Group Center. These forces provided an 8:1 advantage in tank strength over Von Runstedt, in addition to 45 infantry divisions and five cavalry divisions.[11] Here as in the north the going was tough for tanks, with many rivers delaying the advance.

Throughout the campaign Von Runstedt faced tough opposition, and his rate of advance lagged behind the other army groups. Even so, in less than three weeks Army Group South covered 250 miles, destroyed two Soviet armies outright (6th and 12th) in the Uman cauldron, and took Zhitomir--the last stop before the glittering prize of Kiev. Thereafter, Soviet resistance hardened as the Germans pushed up to the Dnieper River.

It was in the center, however, that the most striking gains were achieved. There Marshal Timoshenko's Western Theater opposed Von Bock with two fronts, the Bryansk and Western Fronts, plus a Reserve Front building up behind Moscow.[12] In the first five days, Guderian's 2d Panzer Group and Hoth's 3d Panzer Group advanced 280 miles to surround and invest Minsk; 40 Soviet divisions with 323,000 troops, 3000 tanks, and 1800 guns went into the bag in the Bialystok-Minsk pocket.[13] Hitler's insistence that all encircled forces be reduced before releasing the panzers now slowed the advance, despite hot protests from Von Bock's panzer leaders. Still, by 16 July the panzer groups had completed a second operational bound of 215 miles which carried them to Smolensk, the next great city on the road to Moscow. The Smolensk pocket fell on 3 August, and another 310,000 captives were taken. Soviet tank and artillery losses totaled 3205 and 3120 respectively.[14]

At this point, less than two months into the campaign, the German army stood on the doorstep of the greatest military victory in history. Incomprehensibly, Soviet commanders had elected to fight on the frontiers, inviting encirclement and destruction.[15] Once the Germans were through the front-line defenses, the pace and depth of their attack prevented the Soviets from forming coherent defensive fronts, leaving isolated pockets to be cut off and destroyed. Everywhere the panzers stood victorious, having come farther faster than any armed force ever had.

At that fateful moment, Moscow and victory lay in Hitler's grasp. All four of the Soviet armies arrayed in front of Army Group Center had been encircled and pulverized, the Germans wrecking 114 of 160 Soviet divisions.[16] Soviet commanders from division to front level were arrested and shot.[17] Divisions by the dozen were ground to powder (Timoshenko's report to Stalin on 16 July stated, "We have no trained forces of adequate strength covering the Vyazma-Moscow axis; the main deficiency--no tanks.") [18] Soviet forces in the north and south fought for their lives, unable to send reinforcements to Moscow. Columns of panzers roamed deep in the Soviet rear, sowing panic and confusion. With six more weeks of good flying weather and dry roads, the panzer commanders and their hard-marching *infanterie* comrades had plenty of time to rout the Soviet remnants standing between them and the ultimate

prize, the Kremlin. The Wehrmacht's most noted soldiers--the panzer commanders Guderian, Hoth, and Von Manstein, as well as senior officers like Brauchitsch (the Army Commander), Halder (Chief of the General Staff), and Von Bock (commander of Army Group Center)--urged with passion and conviction that taking Moscow would end the war, and that delay would mean ruin.

The impressive performance of Army Groups North and South in the first heady weeks soon revived Hitler's vacillation, evident in the planning stages, over the true objectives of the campaign. The original allocation of forces, which gave Army Group Center two panzer groups (the others had only one) reflected the army's view that Moscow should be the primary goal. Yet throughout the campaign Hitler wavered, now restraining the racing panzers, now sending them off on one ancillary task or another. Throughout, German commanders fought hard to keep the campaign focused on Moscow, the decisive objective, for they understood clearly what was at stake:

Only the elimination of [Moscow] . . . will remove the possibility of the enemy rebuilding their defeated armed forces and reestablishing them on an operationally effective basis . . . . [T]he offensive by Army Group Center cannot continue after October on account of the weather conditions . . . . [T]he operation can be successful only if the forces of Army Group Center are systematically concentrated on this single goal to the exclusion of other tactical actions which are not essential for the success of the operation.[19]

But Hitler would not listen. Mesmerized by the huge Soviet forces in the Kiev salient, he issued orders on 21 August to break off the armored advance on Moscow and encircle Kiev. Guderian was to wheel southeast to close the northern pincer around the city and link up with Von Rundstedt's panzers coming up from the south. Hoth was diverted northward to assist Von Leeb. Furious, Halder offered to resign and counseled Von Brauchitsch to do the same. But Hitler stood firm, and the advance toward the capital slowed to the pace of the weary infantry as the panzers moved off on their new task.

Was Moscow in fact the key to the war? Could Stalin have survived the fall of Moscow in 1941, as the Czar had in 1812? The evidence is overwhelming that German army planners had drawn the right conclusions in selecting Moscow as the principal campaign objective. Much had changed since the times of Napoleon. In 1941 Moscow served as the communications hub of European Russia, with rail lines and highways radiating outward in all directions to connect the capital with principal population centers. The only significant lateral communications were those which ran through Moscow; without them, Stalin would lose the ability to shift strategic reserves to meet the gravest threats. With Moscow lost, a defensive campaign west of the Volga would be impossible at the strategic level.[20]

The loss of Moscow also would deprive the Soviets of much of Russia's war industry, not yet relocated to the east. Twenty percent of Soviet heavy industry was located in and around the Moscow *oblast*, and much more lay in the path of advancing German armies moving toward the capital. A large part of Soviet industrial capacity would also be overrun in the advance to the Moscow region. In later months, the Soviets would mount a heroic effort to relocate factories and assembly lines far to the east, beyond the range of German panzers and bombers. But in the summer of 1941, these remained in the path of the hard-marching German army. If they could be taken and destroyed, the Red Army would likely never rise again.

The fall of Moscow would of necessity be preceded by the destruction of all Soviet forces in front of the capital. It is unlikely, for the reasons given above, that Stalin would have abandoned his capital without a fight as the Czar had done in 1812. In this case, the remaining Soviet armies defending on the wings would have no choice but to fight on reversed fronts, at great numerical disadvantage. And the fall of Moscow would, at a minimum, free an additional two panzer armies for operations elsewhere. Pressed by victorious German forces on all fronts, already battered and bloodied by Von Leeb's army group in the north and Von Rundstedt's in the south, the Red Army could not have survived such an operational catastrophe.

For all these reasons, the loss of Moscow promised irretrievable military disaster for the Soviets. But Moscow also served as the political and psychological symbol of the communist regime. Its fall might well have destroyed not only the Soviet ability to continue resistance in the West, but the communist regime itself. In his many years in power Stalin had created a cult of personality which stressed his personal leadership as the source of Soviet progress. But his savage treatment of the *kulaks*, land-holding Soviet peasants starved by the millions in the early 1930s, and his paranoid purge

of the military a few years later, created legions of enemies smarting for revenge. Military and political disaster, laid at his feet as the supreme leader of the Soviet state, held also the promise of the total collapse of the Soviet system, a fact the Germans clearly appreciated. While the Russian state might have survived in the vast spaces between the Urals and the Pacific, Soviet military resistance to the Germans in Europe would be crushed.

At this critical juncture, Adolf Hitler committed his greatest strategic blunder, a decision so pregnant with consequence for subsequent history that some scholars have called it the most significant decision of the last 50 years--more important even than Hiroshima.[21] For in sending the panzers of Army Group Center away from Moscow to complete the capture of the Kiev pocket, Hitler willfully threw away his best and perhaps only chance to achieve a decision in the east and victory in World War II. The decision gave the Soviets two months to prepare for the onslaught against their center. In that time they mustered millions into uniform, turned Moscow from an easy prize into a concrete-studded fortress, accelerated the fielding of the mighty T34 tank, and regained their strategic equilibrium. Added to all this was the *rasputitsa* (literally "time without roads"), the seasonal rains that turned the unpaved Russian roads into oceans of mud.

When the Germans resumed their advance on Moscow in early October, after gigantic battles in the Ukraine, they moved at a snail's pace, inching painfully if inexorably forward through ever-growing Soviet resistance as winter came on. They would see the spires of the Kremlin before coming to an exhausted halt, freezing in their summer uniforms, unable to advance another step. In a real sense, for Germany the war ended then, for although the Wehrmacht would fight for 40 more months, inflicting horrific casualties on the Red Army,[22] true victory lay forever beyond its grasp.

## **Deconstructing Barbarossa**

If it is true that Hitler's strategic fumbling, not German operational and tactical failures, saved Russia in 1941, then much of the history of the Second World War must be viewed in a new light. Had Germany succeeded in knocking Russia out of the war in a lightning two-month campaign, after overrunning the rest of the continent from the Arctic circle to the tip of Greece, the virtues of the German operational method could not have been denied. How strong is the case that only Hitler could stop the panzers?

The principal criticisms of Operation Barbarossa center on the timeless military variables of time, space, force, and logistics. Thus the argument runs that Germany could never have defeated the Soviet Union because of its vast size, because Soviet forces were too strong, because the German foray into the Balkans left too little campaigning time before the onset of winter, or because the German advance could not be sustained logistically over the primitive Russian road and rail nets. Given the sheer weight of criticism, the stature of many of the critics, and the ultimate outcome of the war, the argument is a powerful one; even leading German commanders were astounded at Hitler's decision to invade Russia. Yet if we examine each charge, not from the perspective of May 1945, but from that of August 1941, an altogether different picture emerges.

- Perhaps the most common critique of the German failure is that European Russia was simply too vast to be conquered in a single campaign. There can be no question that campaigning in Russia meant campaigning on a grand scale. It is some 600 miles from the Polish border to Moscow, another 900 from Leningrad in the north to Rostov-on-Don in the south. Most of the divisions in the German army were foot-mobile and horse-drawn, and though the panzer and motorized infantry formations could achieve much operating well in advance of the main body, Moscow could not be taken without the stolid infantry and horse-drawn field artillery.

Could it be done? Napoleon's Grand Army, which crossed the Russian frontier at Kovno on 23 June 1812, arrived at Moscow in early September after halting at Vitebsk for 15 days.[23] In 1941, the German troops were marching and fighting at a rate of 15 miles a day, with every seventh day set aside for rest; at that rate the mass of Army Group Center would have arrived before Moscow in mid-August, six to eight six weeks before the autumn rains. (These rates of advance were routinely achieved by German foot and horse-drawn units in the race to the Marne in 1914, and in Russia in 1941 up to the point that Hitler stopped the forward movement of the armies.) The mobile formations could and did achieve prodigious rates of advance which easily supported the *generalstab's* timetable. Even with a start in late June, the arithmetic easily supports a decisive campaign against European Russia in summer 1941.

Nor was it necessary to physically occupy the whole country. German possession of road and rail nets, river crossings,

and main population and industrial centers could and did paralyze Russian resistance throughout western Russia and the Ukraine. While an advance beyond the Volga to the Urals was never contemplated, the complete occupation of all Soviet territory was not required to realize German war aims, centered chiefly on removing the USSR as a threat to German hegemony in Europe and control of Soviet agricultural and industrial resources west of the Urals. If the Soviet Union were pushed beyond the Volga, its armies shattered and most of its heavy industry destroyed or captured, and facing a large and aggressive Japanese army in the east, it is hard to see how the Red Army could have mounted any challenge to German military superiority in the west.

- Another common assertion is that the Wehrmacht could not contend with the overpowering Soviet advantage in numbers. Though the USSR boasted a population perhaps double that of Germany, the Red Army in the west did not grossly outnumber the Wehrmacht in the summer of 1941. The Germans attacked in June with 145 divisions, approximately three million men, against a total of 191 Soviet divisions, supported by 37 mechanized brigades.[24] (These figures do not include substantial support from the Reich's Romanian, Hungarian, and Finnish allies.) However, because of differences in organization, the Red Army fighting in western Russia totaled only about 2.5 million troops in June 1941.[25]

The number of Russian divisions west of the Urals would grow steadily to exceed 300 by summer's end, but though Stalin would put a million more men into uniform by the end of July, even these staggering numbers of untrained troops could not replace the Soviet casualties lost in the opening battles on the frontiers and in the subsequent "cauldron" battles at Minsk, Smolensk, Uman, and elsewhere. Throughout the summer campaign, the Germans fought at *rough numerical parity* with the Soviets, with a qualitative edge that gave them a decisive advantage.

In tank strength as well, the numbers are misleading. Though the Soviets possessed many more tanks than the Germans, most were obsolete and poorly maintained (only 27 percent of the Red Army's 24,000 tanks were running when the war began, and only 1500 could be considered superior to German models).[26] But the critical difference was the method of organization and employment. German panzer forces were self-contained, all-arms formations intended for decisive operations, while Soviet tank units were essentially pure armor employed in support of the infantry. These differences in doctrine and structure, and above all the strong German advantage in combat leadership at every level of command,[27] ensured a striking German superiority in tank warfare that revealed itself in every major engagement.

- Aside from the vastness of Russian space and numbers, the German foray into the Balkans in the spring of 1941 is often advanced as a primary cause for the failure of Barbarossa because it delayed the invasion into the early summer. Yet the rates of advance shown throughout the campaign refute this charge handily. As shown above, the invasion timetable easily supported the fall of Moscow had Von Bock's main effort--the armored spearheads of Panzer Groups 2 and 3--been allowed to continue the advance. Indeed, it is arguable whether or not the Wehrmacht could have mounted Barbarossa at all, on the huge scale envisioned, earlier in the campaigning season--whether or not the Balkan venture was carried out. The severe winter of 1940-41 and an unusually rainy spring, which carried the Bug and other Polish and Russian streams out of their banks, would have made an earlier jump-off into Russia problematic at best.

The presence of powerful Greek and British forces on the German southern flank was no trivial threat. The Greek army had beaten the Italians handily, and British interest in building an Allied stronghold on the Greek peninsula is shown by Churchill's decision to divert strong forces from Wavell's army in North Africa. Left in Allied hands, Greece represented a potential springboard for future air and ground operations aimed at the heart of the Reich. As an added bonus, the quick, successful Balkan campaign gave German forces valuable experience against quality opponents, boosting their morale at low cost in casualties and materiel.

- Many critics argue that a German victory against Russia was simply not possible because of logistical considerations. Martin van Creveld, for instance, is unequivocal: "There is no doubt that the logistic situation would not have allowed an advance by Army Group Center on Moscow by the end of August." [28] Citing the lack of road and rail nets, the poor quality of those that did exist, the distances involved, and the high consumption of fuel and ammunition by the advancing armies, Van Creveld concludes that Barbarossa could not have achieved its objectives for supply reasons alone.

There can be no doubt that the capture of Moscow would have involved great demands on the German supply system, or that German units suffered severely in the breakneck advance. But in the final analysis the charge that victory was beyond German means is not supportable. German commanders themselves, while conscious of supply difficulties and insistent in their demands for greater efforts from their quartermaster brethren, rarely reported themselves unable to achieve their objectives for logistical reasons. It is quite true that German supply services could not support the fighting divisions on the scale called for in pre-war manuals. Individual units sometimes found themselves in dire straits because of shortages. It is curious that most critiques ignore the Soviet situation altogether, yet calculating the logistical support required to sustain an operational advance must take into account the condition of the enemy.

Though critics make much of the primitive road and rail nets in western Russia, German logisticians worked tirelessly through the summer to convert the rail system to German gauge and push the railheads forward. By the middle of August, double-tracked, German-gauged railroads had been advanced as far forward as Orsha and Smolensk, greatly easing the strain on Von Bock's wheeled transportation assets. Army Group Center was now receiving twice as many supply trains per day as it had in July, giving it the logistical capacity to press on to Moscow "with all its strength." [29] Having come 500 miles against strong opposition in seven weeks, the panzers now had six weeks of good fighting weather to cover the final 125 miles.

## Denouement

By mid-month in August 1941, Russian forces defending along the Smolensk-Moscow highway stood swaying, like a punch-drunk fighter waiting for the knockout blow. With no coherent front and their own rear services in shambles from incessant air attacks and panzer raids, the Soviet units facing Von Bock represented but broken fragments of the proud formations that had stood on the Bug only weeks before. Though German strength declined with every step forward, relative to their opponents the German troops retained an absolute superiority in striking power throughout the summer and early fall. Supreme in the air, dominant on the ground, with all the advantages of the initiative and unchecked success, the final operational bound from Smolensk to Moscow against a shaken and demoralized Red Army was surely within their grasp, as the German generals themselves argued so vehemently.

The men, tanks, and supplies diverted to the Ukraine in late August helped win one of history's greatest land battles, taking 665,000 prisoners and destroying 884 tanks and 3178 guns. [30] The state of supply could apparently support the movement and operations of an entire panzer army *away* from the Moscow axis in August (a distance of several hundred miles), then back *toward* Moscow a month later to resume the attack. That it could support the original plan of campaign thus appears highly likely.

The decisive argument is this: If logistics made an August advance to Moscow impossible, in dry weather, how could Von Bock do so in autumn and early winter, in appalling weather, with six fewer hours of daylight each day, against ever-increasing numbers? For advance he did, driving steadily if slowly forward after the great victories in the Ukraine, through mud and rain and snow, through mounting resistance from fresh Soviet divisions sprouting almost overnight, over broken-down roads and rails that grew worse with each day. Operation Typhoon, the resumption of the drive to Moscow in October, exceeded even the astounding success of the Kiev encirclement. Army Group Center succeeded in crushing eight of the nine field armies then massed before the capital; 673,000 troops, 1242 tanks, and 5412 artillery pieces were written off the Soviet order of battle. [31]

Throughout the campaign, the achievements of the Luftwaffe were similarly impressive. Primarily a tactical force designed to operate in support of the army, with one tactical air force supporting each army group, the Luftwaffe outmatched the Soviet air force at every turn, whether in air-to-air combat, close support of ground formations, battlefield interdiction, or aerial reconnaissance. Of particular note was the great responsiveness of German air units, which proved their worth time and again by quickly massing against Soviet tank formations and blunting their attacks at the last moment. In modern warfare the notion of an air force trained and organized to fly close support for major ground formations is an antique one. In 1941 it came close to winning a world war.

By mid-December the tattered *feldgrau* battalions could advance no more, having reached the end of their strength even as 40 fresh Siberian divisions arrived to bolster the defense. Though Moscow never fell, German tactical and operational achievements in Barbarossa remain unequalled. In 20 encirclement battles, the German army advanced 600



miles and overran almost 400,000 square miles of Soviet territory, killing an estimated four million Soviet soldiers and capturing another 3.5 million. More than 14,000 tanks and 25,000 guns were taken or destroyed. It was, and remains in many ways, the most terrible and destructive land campaign ever. The Red Army would take years, burying its dead in their millions, to move the same distance west.

## **The Lessons of History**

It thus seems clear that given its operational freedom, the Wehrmacht would have taken Moscow in September of 1941 and knocked Russia out of the war for good. Though largely ignored in the United States, Operation Barbarossa holds powerful lessons for all who aspire to higher command--and more important, for those who will command the commanders. In Barbarossa we see not only the potential for decisive victory, but also the terrible consequences of failure when soldiers and their political masters diverge. Whether in the maelstrom of total war, in lesser contingencies, or in the intricacies of "peace" operations, such divergence can have tragic consequences.

The first and most striking lesson of Barbarossa is that operational and tactical excellence, while necessary to achieve victory, is not enough to win. The essence of strategy is making the right choices--about strategic objectives, about the means employed to achieve them, and about how those means are used. Germany in 1941 made many right choices. By and large the commanders named to lead major formations were masters of their trade. The grouping of forces and operational planning were clearly good enough to win. The operational objectives assigned to the army groups lent themselves to battlefield success. But the most important choice of all--the primary strategic objective whose capture or destruction would lead to decisive victory--became a political football to be kicked from one end of the theater to the other. At various times Hitler favored Leningrad, Moscow, Kiev, or the Caucasus, or even all four simultaneously. In the end, this inability to focus on one decisive strategic objective doomed Germany to failure and destruction.

Here, too, are sobering lessons for statesmen. Not for the first time in history, the civilian leader of the state viewed the counsel of his military chiefs with ill-concealed contempt.[32] By any standard, the quality of the military advice offered to Hitler was uniformly high. In correctly assessing the true Soviet center of gravity and how to destroy it, the German military and its leaders gave Hitler the key to victory.

Nor can they be charged with timidity. Senior field commanders, General Staff officers, and the Army leadership gave their views frankly and forcefully, often in a manner unlikely to be tolerated in the American military today.[33] The German experience teaches us that at bottom, military professional advice is extremely important. Hitler rejected it, believing himself more capable than his experts. His fate and that of the German nation should remind us that when political leaders disregard military advice and professionalism to intervene in military operations, they do so at great risk. Theirs is the unquestioned right to set the aims and the conditions of the war, but the art of war has moved far beyond the day when the politician and the general were interchangeable. The German nation paid a fearful price to learn that lesson.

Another significant lesson of Barbarossa is that strategy must always be designed to strive for rapid and decisive results. German commanders were steeped in the tradition of Rossbach and Sadowa, of Sedan and Tannenberg--lightning battles that delivered shattering blows. They viewed the static trench warfare of World War I, so foreign to their strategic tradition, as anathema; it was expunged ruthlessly in the interwar period by building a revolutionary army capable of waging mobile, fast-paced operations.

Given a choice, German commanders invariably sought to encircle and annihilate their opponents, rather than wear them down in set-piece battles. This idea was commonly expressed in the term *kesselschlacht* or "cauldron battle," a decisive maneuver to envelop the enemy on all sides and wipe him out. Strong, armor-heavy wings supported by dive bombers punched through defenses to move deep into the enemy rear, seeking to disrupt and dislocate enemy logistics and command and control, and to break up concentrations of reserves as they attempted to form. Foot-mobile infantry divisions and horse-drawn artillery then followed to complete the encirclement and reduce the pockets.

This form of warfare demanded strong nerves and led to severe philosophical differences between the rising generation of panzer generals and their more conservative seniors. At issue was how the panzers should be handled: Should they be allowed to forge ahead into the operational depth of the defense, or halted to allow the infantry divisions to come up? Guderian, the founder of the panzer arm, argued that once a deep penetration had been achieved the panzers must

be kept on the move--the enemy must never be allowed to rally.[34] His more doctrinaire superiors, virtually all gunners or infantrymen, strove to rein in the panzers, fearful they would be cut off, surrounded, and destroyed.

This question remains relevant today; its echoes can be found in the decision by the VII Corps commander in the Gulf War to halt his tanks at nightfall on the first day after successfully penetrating Iraqi front-line defenses. In doing so he remained faithful to the traditions of the US Army, which has always stressed tight control of large formations and adherence to carefully orchestrated, detailed plans. In the Gulf War, the Iraqis' poor standard of training and unwillingness to fight contributed to a short war, but in Operation Barbarossa delay promised disaster.

As he had proved in France, Guderian was probably right. Each time the panzers were held up to reduce a pocket or diverted to subsidiary objectives, the drive lost momentum, allowing the Soviets time to patch together another defensive line. Taking counsel of their fears, conservative staff officers saw scores of fresh Soviet divisions reaching all the way back to Moscow. Guderian and Hoth, moving well forward with their leading tanks and closely watching each day's aerial reconnaissance reports, knew better.

Despite these divergent views, the doctrine of operational encirclement and annihilation served the Wehrmacht well in Russia. The Russian campaign proved that swift, crushing victory was possible even when fought over great distances against numerically strong opponents. The combination of tactical aviation and armor, supported by combined arms and moving at speed into the depth of the enemy's defense, was a deadly combination as long as the spearheads kept moving.

In future conflicts, commanders and their civilian masters will again face these difficult choices. Is a slashing campaign of annihilation too risky? Should the field commanders be given their operational freedom or closely restrained by political control? Should the tanks be loosed or kept tied to the main body? For students and practitioners of the military art, the invasion of Russia is a rich trove, veined with the hard practical lessons of an implacable war fought on the largest scale. Though each war has its own context, its own logic, and its own purpose, there is much to ponder in the history of Barbarossa. It has been almost 60 years since the titans clashed on the open steppes, but someday, somewhere, others will fight again.

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## NOTES

1. Al Stewart, "Roads to Moscow," in the record album *The Best of Al Stewart* (Arista Records, 1992); Hitler's famous quote in the title of this article, "The world will hold its breath," appears in "The Second World War: Europe and the Mediterranean," *West Point Military History Series*, ed. Thomas Greiss (West Point, N.Y.: 1984), p. 111.
2. The authoritative West Point Military History Series describes Barbarossa as "absurdly optimistic," a fair summary of much of the standard historical analysis of the invasion. See "The Second World War: Europe and the Mediterranean," *West Point Military History Series*, p. 103.
3. The author is indebted to Professor Russel Stolfi for the principal thesis of this paper. See R. H. S. Stolfi, *Hitler's Panzers East: World War II Reinterpreted* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1992).
4. John Erickson, *The Road to Stalingrad* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 131-32.
5. Von Leeb's army commanders were Colonel Generals Busch (16th), Von Kuchler (18th), and Hoepner (4th Panzer). Walter Goerlitz, *The German General Staff* (New York: Praeger, 1961), p. 395.
6. Von Manstein would rise to Field Marshal and army group command and become Germany's outstanding operational commander in the war. See Erich von Manstein, *Lost Victories* (Chicago: Regnery, 1958).
7. Matthew Cooper, *The German Army 1939-1945* (Lanham, Md.: Scarborough House, 1990), p. 305.
8. The 7th, 8th, 11th, 27th, 34th, 48th, 52d, 54th, and 55th field armies.

9. Army Group South comprised the 6th, 11th, and 17th armies under Colonel Generals Reichenau, Von Schobert, and Von Stulpnagel, and 1st Panzer Group, commanded by Colonel General von Kleist.
10. Including the 5th, 6th, 9th, 12th, 18th, 21st, 26th, and 37th armies, plus a coastal defense army based at Odessa.
11. B. H. Liddell Hart, *History of the Second World War* (New York: Putnam, 1970), p. 165.
12. Timoshenko's forces initially included the 13th, 19th, 22d, 24th, 28th, 40th, and 50th armies. The armies of the Reserve Front were at this time forming and not yet committed to action.
13. Battle deaths are unknown. Edgar M. Howell, *The Soviet Partisan Movement 1941-1944* (Washington: Dept. of the Army Historical Pamphlet 20-244, 1956), p. 26.
14. Cooper, p. 298.
15. Stolfi, p. 17.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
17. In late June the Front Commander opposing Von Bock, Colonel General Pavlov, was summarily executed along with his chief of staff, signals officer, and a number of division commanders whose units had been wiped out. For an evocative account of the terror, see Theodor Plievier's classic war novel *Moscow* (New York: Doubleday, 1953).
18. Erickson, p. 174.
19. OKH (Army High Command) memorandum submitted to Hitler, 18 August 1941, cited in Cooper, pp. 321-22.
20. In addition to the views of the senior commanders, this was also the official view of the intelligence department responsible for all German military intelligence on the eastern front. See Reinhard Gehlen, *The Service* (New York: World Publishing, 1972), p. 31. Gehlen headed the General Staff's Foreign Armies East section from 1942 to 1945 and later founded and led the German equivalent of the CIA in West Germany.
21. Stolfi, p. 202.
22. "The Red Army suffered 29,629,205 casualties from 22 June 1942-9 May 1945, of which 11, 285,057 were [deaths] and 18,344,148 medical." Colonel General G. F. Krivosheyev, cited by Lawrence G. Kelley in "The Soviet Soldier in World War II: `Death is But Four Steps Away,'" *Parameters*, 27 (Winter 1997-98), 167.
23. This movement was made over roads even less developed than those of 1941. See Count Philippe-Paul de Segur, *Napoleon's Russian Campaign* (Alexandria, Va.: Time-Life, 1980). Segur served throughout the Napoleonic era as an aide-de-camp to the Emperor, becoming a brigadier on the eve of the Russian campaign. His memoirs remain the classic account of the destruction of the Grand Army.
24. Cooper, p. 283.
25. Russian divisions were significantly smaller than German ones, and German corps and field armies possessed support units not found in their Soviet counterparts. See Stolfi, p. 154.
26. The Soviet T34, superior in most respects to German tanks used in Barbarossa, did not appear in significant numbers until October 1941. See Cooper, p. 283.
27. In 1941, 75 percent of Red Army officers had held their positions for less than one year. Soviet corps-level commanders averaged 16 years of service (the same as current American *battalion* commanders) and were 12 years younger than the average German *division* commander. Kelley, p. 169.
28. Martin van Creveld, *Supplying War* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1977), p. 176.

29. Stolfi, pp. 176-77.

30. Cooper, p. 325.

31. Ibid., p. 330. These figures do not include battle deaths or wounded in action.

32. A shocking example of civilian contempt for military advice in American history is related in Lieutenant General Charles G. Cooper's "The Day It Became the Longest War" *Proceedings*, May 1996. As aide-de-camp to the Chief of Naval Operations, Cooper witnessed a meeting between the Joint Chiefs of Staff and President Johnson in November 1965. Concerned about plunging into a major conflict with no real strategic objective, the Chiefs pressed Johnson to expand air and naval operations in the north to bring the full weight of American military power to bear, rather than engaging in a protracted ground war limited to the south. Screaming obscenities, Johnson ridiculed the Chiefs before dismissing them with "Now get the hell out of my office!"

33. Many paid the price for their courage. Before the year was out, the Army Commander, the commanders of all three army groups, and Hitler's most famous panzer commander, Guderian, as well as many other senior officers, would lose their posts for opposing, in one way or another, Hitler's will.

34. One example among many is Guderian's attack on Orel in the first week of October. At that point he was operating 130 miles in the Soviet rear. See *West Point History Series*, p. 118.

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Reviewed 11 March 1999. Please send comments or corrections to [carl\\_Parameters@conus.army.mil](mailto:carl_Parameters@conus.army.mil)