

Eighty years Ago: June 22, 1941: Nazi Germany Attacks the Soviet Union

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War against the Soviet Union was what Hitler had wanted from the beginning. He had already made this very clear on the pages of Mein Kampf, written in the mid-1920s. Furthermore, as a German historian has recently convincingly demonstrated, it was a war against the Soviet Union, and not against Poland, France, or Britain, that Hitler had wanted and planned to unleash in 1939. On August 11 of that year, Hitler explained to Carl J. Burckhardt, an official of the League of Nations, that “everything he undertook was directed against Russia,” and that “if the West [i.e., the French and the British] is too stupid and too blind to comprehend this, he would be forced to reach an understanding with the Russians, turn and defeat the West, and then turn back with all his strength to strike a blow against the Soviet Union.”

This is in fact what happened. The West did turn out to be “too stupid and blind,” as Hitler saw it, to give him “a free hand” in the east, so he did make a deal with Moscow — the infamous “Hitler-Stalin Pact” — and then unleashed war against Poland, France, and Britain. But his ultimate objective remained the same: to attack and destroy the Soviet Union as soon as possible. Hitler and the German generals were convinced they had learned an important lesson from World War I. Devoid of the raw materials, such as oil and rubber, needed to win a modern war, Germany could not win their planned new edition of the “Great War.” In order to win such a war, Germany would have to win it fast, very fast. This is how the blitzkrieg concept was born, that is, the idea of warfare (Krieg) fast as lightning (Blitz).

Blitzkrieg meant motorized war, so in preparation for such a war Germany, during the thirties, cranked out massive numbers of tanks and planes as well as trucks to transport troops. In addition, gargantuan amounts of oil and rubber were imported and stockpiled. As we have seen, much of this oil was purchased from US corporations, some of which also kindly made available the “recipe” for producing synthetic fuel from coal. In 1939 and 1940, this equipment permitted the Wehrmacht and Luftwaffe to overwhelm the Polish, Dutch, Belgian, and French defences with thousands of planes and tanks in a matter of weeks; blitzkriege, “lightning-fast wars,” were invariably followed by blitzsiege, “lightning-fast victories.”

The victories against Poland, France, et cetera were spectacular enough, but they did not provide Germany with much loot in the form of vitally important oil and rubber. Instead, “lightning warfare” actually depleted the stockpiles built up before the war. Fortunately for Hitler, in 1940 and 1941 Germany was able to continue importing oil from the still neutral United States, mostly via other neutral (and friendly) countries such as Franco’s Spain.

Moreover, under the terms of the Hitler-Stalin Pact the Soviet Union herself also supplied Germany rather generously with oil. However, it was most troubling for Hitler that, in return, Germany had to supply the Soviet Union with high-quality industrial products and state-of-the-art military technology, which was used by the Soviets to modernize their army and improve their weaponry. Another headache for Hitler was the fact that the terms of his deal with the Soviets had permitted the latter to occupy eastern Poland, thus shifting their border, and their defences, a few hundred kilometres to the west, making the planned march to Moscow much longer for the German military. (As the Wehrmacht did actually make it to the outskirts of Moscow in late 1941, it can be argued that they would probably have taken the city, and perhaps won the war, had they been able to launch their attack from positions further east.)



Elements of the German [3rd Panzer Army](#) on the road near [Pruzhanjy](#), June 1941 (Public Domain)

In 1939, Hitler had reluctantly shelved his plan for war against the Soviet Union. But he resurrected it very soon after the defeat of France, in the summer of 1940. A formal order to prepare plans for such an attack, to be code-named Operation Barbarossa (Unternehmen Barbarossa) was given a few months later, on December 18, 1940.⁴ By 1940 nothing had changed as far as Hitler was concerned: “The real enemy was the one in the east.”⁵ Hitler simply did not want to wait much longer before realizing the great ambition of his life, that is, destroying the country he had defined as his arch-enemy in Mein Kampf. Moreover, he knew that the Soviets were frantically preparing their defences for a German attack which, as they knew only too well, would come sooner or later. (The notion that, on account of their 1939 non-aggression pact, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union were friendly “allies” is hopelessly erroneous.) Since the Soviet Union was getting stronger by the day, time was obviously not on Hitler’s side. How much longer could he wait before the window of opportunity would close? Furthermore, waging a blitzkrieg against the Soviet Union promised to provide Germany with the virtually limitless resources of that huge country, including Ukrainian wheat to provide Germany’s population, experiencing wartime shortages, with plenty of food; minerals such as coal, from which synthetic oil and rubber could be produced; and — last, but certainly not least — the rich oil fields of Baku and Grozny, where the gas-guzzling Panzers and Stukas would be able to fill their tanks to the

brim at any time. Steeled with these assets, it would then be a simple matter for Hitler to settle accounts with Britain, starting, for example, with the capture of Gibraltar. Germany would finally be a genuine world power, invulnerable within a European “fortress” stretching from the Atlantic to the Urals, possessed of limitless resources, and therefore capable of winning even long, drawn-out wars against any antagonist — including the US — in one of the future “wars of the continents” conjured up in Hitler’s feverish imagination.

Image on the right: [OKH](#) commander Field Marshal [Walther von Brauchitsch](#) and Hitler study maps during the early days of Hitler’s Russian Campaign (Public Domain)



Hitler and his generals were confident that the blitzkrieg they prepared to unleash against the Soviet Union would be as successful as their earlier lightning wars against Poland and France had been. They considered the Soviet Union as a “giant with feet of clay,” whose army, presumably decapitated by Stalin’s purges of the late 1930s, was “not more than a joke,” as Hitler himself put it on one occasion. In order to fight and, of course, win the decisive battles, they allowed for a campaign of four to six weeks, possibly to be followed by some mopping-up operations, during which the remnants of the Soviet host would “be chased across the country like a bunch of beaten Cossacks.” In any event, Hitler felt supremely confident, and on the eve of the attack, he “fancied himself to be on the verge of the greatest triumph of his life.”

In Washington and London, the military experts likewise believed that the Soviet Union would not be able to put up significant resistance to the Nazi juggernaut, whose military exploits of 1939–40 had earned it a reputation of invincibility. The British secret services were convinced that the Soviet Union would be “liquidated within eight to ten weeks,” and the chief of the Imperial General Staff averred that the Wehrmacht would slice through the Red Army “like a warm knife through butter,” and that the Red Army would be rounded up “like cattle.” According to expert opinion in Washington, Hitler would “crush Russia [sic] like an egg.”

The German attack started on June 22, 1941, in the early hours of the morning. Three million German soldiers and almost 700,000 allies of Nazi Germany crossed the border. Their equipment consisted of 600,000 motor vehicles, 3,648 tanks, more than 2,700 planes, and just over 7,000 pieces of artillery. At first, everything went according to plan. Huge

holes were punched in the Soviet defences, impressive territorial gains were made rapidly, and hundreds of thousands of Red Army soldiers were killed, wounded, or taken prisoner in a number of spectacular “encirclement battles.” The road to Moscow seemed to lay open. However, all too soon it became evident that the blitzkrieg in the east would not be the cakewalk that had been expected. Facing the most powerful military machine on earth, the Red Army predictably took a major beating but, as propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels confided to his diary as early as July 2, also put up a tough resistance and hit back very hard on numerous occasions. General Franz Halder, in many ways the “godfather” of Operation Barbarossa’s plan of attack, acknowledged that Soviet resistance was much stronger than anything the Germans had faced in Western Europe. Wehrmacht reports cited “hard,” “tough,” even “wild” resistance, causing heavy losses in men and equipment on the German side. More often than expected, Soviet forces managed to launch counterattacks that slowed down the German advance. Some Soviet units went into hiding in the vast Pripet Marshes and elsewhere, organized deadly partisan warfare, and threatened the long and vulnerable German lines of communication. It also turned out that the Red Army was much better equipped than expected. German generals were “amazed,” writes a German historian, by the quality of Soviet weapons such as the Katyusha rocket launcher (a.k.a. “Stalin Organ”) and the T-34 tank. Hitler was furious that his secret services had not been aware of the existence of some of this weaponry.

The greatest cause of concern, as far as the Germans were concerned, was the fact that the bulk of the Red Army managed to withdraw in relatively good order and eluded destruction in a huge encirclement battle, in the kind of repeat of Cannae or Sedan that Hitler and his generals had dreamed of. The Soviets appeared to have carefully observed and analyzed the German blitzkrieg successes of 1939 and 1940 and to have learned useful lessons. They must have noticed that in May 1940 the French had massed the bulk of their forces right at the border as well as in Belgium, thus making it possible for the German war machine to encircle them. (British troops were also caught in this encirclement but managed to escape via Dunkirk.) The Soviets did leave some troops at the border, of course, and these troops predictably suffered the Soviet Union’s major losses during the opening stages of Barbarossa. But — contrary to what is claimed by historians such as Richard Overy — the bulk of the Red Army was held back in the rear, avoiding entrapment. It was this “defence in depth” — facilitated by the acquisition of a “glacis,” a territorial “breathing space,” in Poland in 1939 — that frustrated the German ambition to destroy the Red Army in its entirety. As Marshal Zhukov was to write in his memoirs, “the Soviet Union would have been smashed if we had organized all our forces at the border.”

As early as the middle of July, as Hitler’s war in the east started to lose its Blitz-qualities, countless Germans, military as well as civilians, of low as well as high rank, including Hitler himself, lost their belief in a quick victory. And by the end of August, at a time when Barbarossa should have been winding down, the Wehrmacht’s high command (Oberkommando der Wehrmacht, or OKW) acknowledged that it might no longer be possible to win the war in 1941. A major problem was the fact that, when Barbarossa started on June 22, the available supplies of fuel, tires, spare parts, et cetera, were good enough for only about two months. This had been deemed sufficient because it was expected that within two months the Soviet Union would be on its knees and its unlimited resources — industrial products as well as raw materials — would therefore be available to the Germans. However, by late August the German spearheads were nowhere near those distant regions of the Soviet Union where oil, that most precious of all martial commodities, was to be had. If the tanks managed to keep on rolling, though increasingly slowly, into the seemingly endless

Russian and Ukrainian expanses, it was to a large extent by means of fuel and rubber imported, via Spain and occupied France, from the US.

The flames of optimism flared up again in September, when German troops captured Kiev, and, further north, made progress in the direction of Moscow. Hitler believed, or at least pretended to believe, that the end was now near for the Soviets. In a public speech in the Berlin Sportpalast on October 3, he declared that the eastern war was virtually over. And the Wehrmacht was ordered to deliver the coup de grâce by launching Operation Typhoon (Unternehmen Taifun), an offensive aimed at taking Moscow. However, the odds for success looked increasingly slim, as the Soviets were busily bringing in reserve units from the Far East. (They had been informed by their master spy in Tokyo, Richard Sorge, that the Japanese, whose army was stationed in northern China, were no longer considering attacking the Soviets' vulnerable borders in the Vladivostok area.) To make things worse, the Germans no longer enjoyed superiority in the air, particularly over Moscow. Also, sufficient supplies of ammunition and food could not be brought up from the rear to the front, since the long supply lines were severely hampered by partisan activity. Finally, it was getting chilly in the Soviet Union, though no colder than usual at that time of the year. But the German high command, confident that their eastern blitzkrieg would be over by the end of the summer, had failed to supply the troops with the equipment necessary to fight in the rain, mud, snow, and freezing temperatures of a Russian fall and winter.

Taking Moscow loomed as an extremely important objective in the minds of Hitler and his generals. It was believed, though probably wrongly, that the fall of its capital would "decapitate" the Soviet Union and thus bring about its collapse. It also seemed important to avoid a repeat of the scenario of the summer of 1914, when the seemingly unstoppable German advance into France had been halted in extremis on the eastern outskirts of Paris, during the Battle of the Marne. This disaster — from the German perspective — had robbed Germany of nearly certain victory in the opening stages of the Great War and had forced it into a lengthy struggle that, lacking sufficient resources and blockaded by the British navy, it was doomed to lose. This time, in a new Great War fought against a new arch-enemy, the Soviet Union, there was to be no "miracle of the Marne," that is, no defeat just outside the capital, and Germany would therefore not have to once more fight, resourceless and blockaded, a long, drawn-out conflict it would be doomed to lose. Unlike Paris, Moscow would fall, history would not repeat itself, and Germany would end up being victorious. Or so they hoped in Hitler's headquarters.

The Wehrmacht continued to advance, albeit very slowly, and by mid-November some units found themselves only thirty kilometres from the capital. But the troops were now totally exhausted and running out of supplies. Their commanders knew that it was simply impossible to take Moscow, tantalizingly close as the city may have been, and that even doing so would not bring them victory. On December 3, a number of units abandoned the offensive on their own initiative. Within days, however, the entire German army in front of Moscow was simply forced on the defensive. Indeed, on December 5, at three in the morning, in cold and snowy conditions, the Red Army suddenly launched a major, well-prepared counterattack. The Wehrmacht's lines were pierced in many places, and the Germans were thrown back between 100 and 280 kilometres with heavy losses of men and equipment. It was only with great difficulty that a catastrophic encirclement could be avoided.

On December 8, Hitler ordered his army to abandon the offensive and to move into defensive positions. He blamed this setback on the supposedly unexpected early arrival of

winter, refused to pull back further to the rear, as some of his generals suggested, and proposed to attack again in the spring. Thus ended Hitler's blitzkrieg against the Soviet Union, the war that, had it been victorious, would have realized the great ambition of his life, the destruction of the Soviet Union. More importantly, such a victory would also have provided Nazi Germany with sufficient oil and other resources to make it a virtually invulnerable world power. As such, Nazi Germany would very likely have been capable of finishing off stubborn Great Britain, even if the US would have rushed to help its Anglo-Saxon cousin, which, in early December of 1941, was not yet in the cards. A blitzsieg, that is, a rapid victory against the Soviet Union, then, was supposed to have made a German defeat impossible, and would in all likelihood have done so. (It is probably fair to say that if Nazi Germany had defeated the Soviet Union in 1941, Germany would today still be the hegemon of Europe, and possibly of the Middle East and North Africa as well.) However, defeat in the Battle of Moscow in December 1941 meant that Hitler's blitzkrieg did not produce the hoped-for blitzsieg. In the new "Battle of the Marne" just to the west of Moscow, Nazi Germany suffered the defeat that made victory impossible, not only victory against the Soviet Union itself, but also victory against Great Britain and victory in the war in general. It ought to be noted that the United States was not yet involved in the war against Germany.

Bearing in mind the lessons of World War I, Hitler and his generals had known from the start that, in order to win the new Great War they had unleashed, Germany had to win fast, lightning-fast. But on December 5, 1941, it became evident to everyone present in Hitler's headquarters that a blitzsieg against the Soviet Union would not be forthcoming, and that Germany was doomed to lose the war, if not sooner, then later. According to General Alfred Jodl, chief of the operations staff of the OKW, Hitler then realized that he could no longer win the war. And so it can be argued, as a German historian, an expert on the war against the Soviet Union, has done, that the success of the Red Army in front of Moscow was unquestionably the "major break" (Zäsur) of the entire world war.

In other words, the tide of World War II can be said to have turned on December 5, 1941. However, as real tides turn not suddenly but rather gradually and imperceptibly, the tide of the war turned not on a single day, but over a period of days, weeks, and even months, in the period of approximately three months that elapsed between the (late) summer of 1941 and early December of that same year. The tide of the war in the east turned gradually, but it did not do so imperceptibly. Already in August 1941, astute observers had started to doubt that a German victory, not only in the Soviet Union but in the war in general, still belonged to the realm of possibilities. The well-informed Vatican, for example, initially very enthusiastic about Hitler's "crusade" against the Soviet homeland of "godless" Bolshevism, started to express grave concerns about the situation in the east in late summer 1941; by mid-October, it came to the conclusion that Germany would lose the war. Likewise in mid-October, the Swiss secret services reported that "the Germans can no longer win the war." By late November, a defeatism of sorts had started to infect the higher ranks of the Wehrmacht and of the Nazi Party. Even as they were urging their troops forward toward Moscow, some generals opined that it would be preferable to make peace overtures and wind down the war without achieving the great victory that had seemed so certain at the start of Operation Barbarossa. When the Red Army launched its devastating counteroffensive on December 5, Hitler himself realized that he would lose the war. But he was not prepared to let the German public know that. The nasty tidings from the front near Moscow were presented to the public as a temporary setback, blamed on the supposedly unexpectedly early arrival of winter and/or on the incompetence or cowardice of certain commanders. (It was only a good year later, after the catastrophic defeat in the Battle of

Stalingrad during the winter of 1942-43, that the German public, and the entire world, would realize that Germany was doomed; which is why even today many historians believe that the tide turned in Stalingrad.)

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