

History of World War II: Nazi Aggression and the Military Imbalance of the Blitzkrieg

By [Shane Quinn](#)

Global Research, March 18, 2022

Region: [Europe](#), [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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The Germans learned more from defeat in the First World War than the Allies had learned from victory. During the interwar years (1918–1939), German militarists paid much greater attention to the potential of the tank (panzer) and tactics of infiltration than did either the British or French.

In Berlin, it was decided by 1938 that at the head of the invading spearheads would not be placed infantry, moving at 3 miles per hour, but rather panzers advancing at 30 miles per hour.

The German colonel Heinz Guderian’s views, expounded in his 1937 book ‘Achtung Panzer’, held significant weight in shaping Wehrmacht thinking; through which Guderian outlined in detail the vast possibilities of mechanised armour in warfare. “Strike hard and quickly and don’t disperse your forces”, Guderian wrote in summarising Blitzkrieg methods. Not every senior German officer agreed without reservation in such opinions. What proved critical in the Wehrmacht adopting the Blitzkrieg was, it must be said, the Nazi Party and its far-right autocrat Adolf Hitler.

Military analyst Donald J. Goodspeed wrote,

“Had it not been for Hitler and for the whole climate of opinion brought in by the Nazi Party, the Wehrmacht might have proved little more enlightened about the possibilities of armored warfare than the British and French. The Nazis, however, as befitting men who considered themselves revolutionaries, were all for what was new, bold and modern, and the idea of great tank forces caught their imagination. Armored and mechanised warfare had an immense attraction for them. The Blitzkrieg fitted Nazi policies as a glove fits a hand”.

The Nazi cause had been aided by the opposition’s inferior quality – an outmoded, under-equipped Polish military, and a French Army plagued by obsolescent First World War doctrines and an attitude centred on defence. They had forgotten one of Napoleon’s

favourite mottos, “The side that stays within its fortifications is beaten”.

The French armed forces had not [recovered](#) from the mutinies, which had spread through its ranks during the spring and summer of 1917. By 9 June 1917, mutinies had broken out in an eye-watering 54 French divisions. Even in those units where no mutinies occurred, more than half of French soldiers returning from leave reported back drunk. Rather than the problems being brought out into the open, discussed and possibly cured, the mutinies were covered up. Poor morale remained widespread in the French Army, by the time the Germans invaded on 10 May 1940. The French had decided, by 1917, that the cost of war was not worth the price paid in blood.

The Blitzkrieg promised results which the Germans most needed: Short and conclusive victories, which would not put an undue strain on their limited manpower and mineral resources. The Nazis added their own touches to the Blitzkrieg envisaged by Guderian. Under fascist influence the Blitzkrieg was designed to disorganise and overwhelm the enemy, cities would be bombed, refugees would be targeted by aircraft along roads, fifth columns would divide and undermine the opposition, propaganda was used while terror followed in the wake of occupation.

Regardless, the Blitzkrieg still had more of a psychological effect rather than a physical one. German air raids inflicted minor damage by comparison to Anglo-American aerial bombing, which was increasingly executed with huge four-engined aircraft. The German blitz of Britain, lasting for 8 months until May 1941, resulted in between 40,000 to 43,000 deaths. In little more than a week during the late summer of 1943, the British and American bombing of Hamburg (Operation Gomorrah) [killed](#) almost the same number of people, between 34,000 to 43,000 deaths. Among other buildings destroyed in Hamburg, 24 hospitals and 277 schools were levelled by the Anglo-Americans in Operation Gomorrah.

The Blitzkrieg led to great victories against the unwary and demoralised. This was at least part of the reason why Operation Barbarossa had been so successful, in its opening days and weeks. Russian specialist Evan Mawdsley [realised](#),

“in the short-term, in 1941, the collective mentality of the rank and file of the Red Army was a source of weakness. Many Soviet soldiers fought badly or surrendered without a fight in 1941, demoralized troops in a demoralized society... The Wehrmacht did not fight with these handicaps. German soldiers and airmen were better organized, better trained, and more experienced. This goes a long way towards explaining why Hitler’s forces were able to achieve so much without decisive numerical superiority”.

It is conventionally believed, for an invasion to succeed decisively, the attackers should outnumber the defenders by 3 to 1. Almost from the beginning of the Nazi-Soviet War, the Germans were outnumbered in manpower, tanks, planes and artillery.

The German-led armies invaded the USSR on 22 June 1941 with 3,767,000 men, while in the USSR at that time the Soviet military [consisted](#) of 5,373,000 personnel. As the attack started, 11,000 Soviet tanks were immediately in opposition to 4,000 German-Axis tanks; there were 9,100 Soviet combat aircraft in the western USSR against 4,400 German-Axis combat aircraft, and 19,800 Soviet artillery pieces as opposed to 7,200 German-Axis artillery pieces.

In the whole of the USSR, the Red Army had an [astounding](#) 23,100 tanks in June 1941, along

with 20,000 aircraft. Mawdsley has provided the figures. By the end of September 1941, the German-Axis forces had destroyed 14,900 Soviet tanks and 7,000 aircraft.

Considerable numbers of Soviet soldiers were indeed demoralised in 1941. This was, in the main, because of the devastating effects of Joseph Stalin's purges of the Red Army high command (1937-41), which had resulted in the liquidation of many thousands of talented Soviet military officers. Moreover, there was questionable loyalty to Soviet Russia in the Baltic states, which had only been absorbed into the Soviet Union the year before in June 1940. In Estonia, the English author Chris Bellamy recalled how, "Immediately after the German attack, Estonian soldiers began to desert from Soviet bases in large numbers".

A similar scenario unfolded in neighbouring Latvia, during the days after Barbarossa was unleashed. Bellamy, in his study of the Nazi-Soviet War continued, "Only about 3,000 Latvian soldiers retreated with the Red Army: the rest, either as individuals or as whole units led by their commanders, deserted, and then started to attack Red Army and NKVD units".

Hitler was intent on treating the Baltic and eastern European populations as second class citizens, subject to their German colonial masters. The cold brutality of Nazi rule would prove a secondary factor in the eventual Wehrmacht defeat.

The Blitzkrieg looked at first to be running smoothly in the Baltics. General Erich von Manstein's 56th Panzer Corps advanced 155 miles in 4 days, to reach Daugavpils in south-eastern Latvia on 25 June 1941. Yet the Blitzkrieg's innate military imbalance became apparent in the Soviet Union's gigantic terrain. Manstein's panzers had to wait for 6 days at Daugavpils, before German infantry from the 16th Army could catch up with them. This issue would surface time and again.

Goodspeed observed of the Blitzkrieg "there was always something a little gimcrack and fraudulent about it, something militarily unsound, which could succeed only by bluff and braggadocio".

Stalin was caught off guard as the German attack commenced. When awakened and informed of large-scale German artillery attacks Stalin "muttered that the outbreak of hostilities must have originated in a conspiracy within the Wehrmacht", historian and Stalin biographer Robert Service wrote. Hitler had been seriously planning out his invasion for almost a year, from the second half of July 1940. Hitler pondered attacking the USSR in the autumn of 1940; but he was [convinced](#) not to by the 58-year-old Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, who knew more about war than the Führer. Keitel implored that logistics would not be ready in time.

A story has persisted for many years, on learning the Germans had invaded, that Stalin suffered a mental collapse and went into hiding. This is far from the truth. When told of the German bombardment, Stalin unrealistically hoped that Hitler was not aware of it and would cancel the invasion. This feeling was dispelled within hours of the German attack, when the Third Reich's Ambassador to the USSR, Friedrich von Schulenburg, relayed the German declaration of war to Vyacheslav Molotov, the Soviet Foreign Minister.

On hearing this Stalin was distraught, unable to focus his mind on essential matters. Out of shock and embarrassment, Stalin could not bring himself to inform the Russian public of the German attack. It was instead Molotov who announced to the people by radio, at noon on 22 June 1941, that their country had been invaded, and rumours then spread as to where Stalin

was. The records show, such as in Stalin's visitors' book, that he did not disappear but continued to work for long hours, consulting with a range of military and political personnel. For example from 3.20 am on 23 June, Stalin [worked](#) for 15 hours without a break.

Then about a week after the invasion began, the full weight of the disaster began to hit home. On 27 June, Stalin had learned on a visit to the Ministry of Defence that the Germans had already reached Minsk, the capital of Soviet Belarus. The invaders had blown away the Red Army divisions located closest to the Nazi border, forces which Stalin thought could hold the Germans up. It seems at this time that Stalin feared a Soviet defeat was an inevitability. In such a frame of mind his morale plummeted, and he retired to his dacha early on 29 June. It was not a nervous breakdown but a natural reaction of despondency to a catastrophe. Service wrote "the greatest military disaster of the twentieth century" was unfolding.

The Soviet leader had only snapped out of his depression, when Molotov led the way in visiting him at his residence and soothingly encouraged him to return to work. Molotov later [acknowledged](#) of his leader, "It can't be said he fell apart; certainly he was suffering but he did not show it. Stalin definitely had his difficulties. It would be stupid to claim he didn't suffer".

As the German invasion elapsed into weeks, the morale of Stalin ebbed and flowed, and it was probably never as low again as it had been in late June 1941. One of the biggest blows thereafter was the fall of Kiev, on 19 September 1941. It is interesting to note that it took the Wehrmacht, the world's strongest military power, 4 weeks to capture Kiev - from the time that Hitler had ordered a southward move into the Ukraine on 21 August, through southern Belarus and western Russia. The fighting did not die down in the Kiev region until 26 September, so one could stretch the battle out to 5 weeks.

Of the present day Ukrainian crisis many in the Western mainstream, military analysts and media commentators, have ludicrously claimed in recent weeks that Russian forces should have successfully entered Kiev in 2 or 3 days. They would do well to consult the history books. Kiev is furthermore a far larger city today than it was in 1941, and it would obviously take longer to encircle and subdue.

A parallel should, however, not at all be drawn between the circumstances of 1941 and the current Ukraine crisis. The Nazi war against the Soviet Union was unprovoked, genocidal and imperialist to the core. The author is not suggesting that he supports the Russian military intervention in the Ukraine, but it may be worth understanding the scenario from the Kremlin's perspective.

Diplomatic [options](#) were open to Moscow in February 2022. Who knows how it could have developed had talks been pursued, and they still can be. Yet it would seem unlikely that the Kremlin could have made headway diplomatically with the West. The Russians have repeatedly been frustrated by Western duplicity, led overwhelmingly by an aggressive and expansionist United States, which continues to dominate much of the world, often through gunboat diplomacy.

The experienced Pakistani lieutenant-general, Tariq Khan, who could hardly be described as pro-Russian, [wrote](#) early this month "the West goaded Russia into a corner where it probably had no other alternative other than an invasion of Ukraine. This was done by the gradual creep forward policy of NATO which, in 1990, had 16 members and now has expanded to 30 members and that too after the Cold War... This was unacceptable to

Russia, but the West was unmoved and continued to implement alignments and agreements that were a direct threat to Russia”.

The Russian offensive in the Ukraine came as a reaction to long-held, plausible security concerns in Moscow: relating, as Lt. Gen. Khan has highlighted, to relentless US-NATO enlargement to Russia’s very borders – along with ongoing, increased Western militarisation and politicisation of the Ukraine itself; despite it being a territory with centuries-long historical and cultural ties to Russia, and not the West.

The Ukraine is of utmost geostrategic importance to the Russian state. A century ago the Polish-born revolutionary socialist, Rosa Luxemburg, especially criticised what she called “silly Ukrainian nationalism”. Luxemburg stated that Ukrainian nationalism was very [different](#) from Czech, Polish or Finnish nationalism; because Ukrainian nationalism was “nothing more than extravagance, the vain pride of a dozen petty-bourgeois intelligentsia with no roots whatsoever in the economic, political, or spiritual situation of the land and no historical tradition”; since the Ukraine had “never constituted a nation or a state and was devoid of a national culture”.

Luxemburg noted that “nationalism in the Russian Ukraine hadn’t represented anything until the Bolshevik revolution of October 1917. It was a soap bubble, the vanity of a dozen professors and lawyers, the majority of whom couldn’t even read Ukrainian”. Herein lie the roots of Ukrainian nationalism.

Luxemburg believed that the Bolshevik Party leader, Vladimir Lenin, should have retained the territorial integrity of the Russian Empire, under the patronage of the socialist revolution. As Luxemburg predicted, the prospect of self-determination split the Ukraine up into pretentious little spheres; and she forecast that the Ukraine would perform a “fatal role” in the fate of the Russian revolution.

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Shane Quinn *obtained an honors journalism degree and he writes primarily on foreign affairs and historical subjects. He is a Research Associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG).*

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