

History of World War II: Operation Barbarossa, Consequences of the Wehrmacht's November 1941 Orsha Conference, Advance on Moscow Resumes

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On 13 November 1941 a significant conference was convened in Nazi-occupied Belarus, at the city of Orsha, in order to decide whether the Wehrmacht should resume its advance on Moscow, or go over to the defence for the winter.

The German Army Group North and Army Group South commanders, **Ritter von Leeb and Gerd von Rundstedt**, both wanted to switch to a solid defensive line, and thereby rest on the territorial gains made against the USSR up until mid-November 1941. Hindsight is useful but their views were undoubtedly correct.

Field Marshal von Leeb, who had no fondness for the Nazis being a staunch monarchist and catholic, was also considered a world authority on defensive warfare, and his opinion should especially have been heeded. Some of von Leeb’s early writings on defensive warfare were translated into Russian, and had even been incorporated into the Soviet Army’s Field Service regulations of 1936, according to Samuel W. Mitcham, the American military historian. Von Leeb himself believed, “Defence is mostly the necessary recourse of distress; the defenders are nearly always in a critical position”.

Already on the night of 11 November, the temperature just west of Moscow had dropped to minus 20 degrees Celsius. Because of Nazi arrogance and negligence, Wehrmacht troops were not furnished with winter clothing, nor did they have basic medical and military supplies. They were in no condition to fight a winter war that could succeed. Some German soldiers resorted to stealing the felt boots, fur caps and long great coats from dead Russian troops. Regardless, more and more Germans were exiting the battlefield due to frostbite, severe cases of which were first recorded on 7 November 1941.

The Army Group Center commander, **Fedor von Bock**, had a different opinion to von Leeb and von Rundstedt. Army Group Center was tasked with capturing Moscow and bringing the

war to a successful conclusion. Driven by personal ambition and his hope that the Russians were almost finished, Field Marshal von Bock, ignoring the fierce weather and weakened state of his army, insisted that the march towards Moscow should continue.

Adolf Hitler supported this stance. As did the Army High Command **Chief-of-Staff Franz Halder**, who said at the Orsha meeting that “the enemy is worse off than we are; he is on the verge of collapse”.

Hitler, Halder and von Bock were influenced too by recollections of the First World War. Haunting the Orsha conference like a ghost was the German memory of the September 1914 Battle of the Marne which, it is no exaggeration to say, cost the German Empire victory in World War I. During the Battle of the Marne in northern France, possible German success was thrown away due to a lack of resolution. Though the past usually has lessons to teach, they can be misunderstood, and the similarities are few between the Battle of the Marne and the German position in the late stages of Operation Barbarossa.

It was agreed, therefore, that the advance on Moscow would resume, as it did on 15 November 1941. In awful conditions the Germans struggled forward, pushing Soviet forces back to the Volga Reservoir, about 75 miles north of Moscow. On 22 November Panzer Group 3 entered Klin and promptly captured it, 52 miles from Moscow. On 24 November the town of Solnechnogorsk fell, 38 miles north-west of the Russian capital.

On 27 November 1941 the 7th panzer division formed a bridgehead over the Moscow-Volga Canal; and also on 27 November, the 2nd SS panzer division Das Reich captured Istra, a mere 31 miles from Moscow. However, as of 26 November the Germans had suffered 743,122 casualties; taking into account illnesses and those unavailable through frostbite, the number would slightly exceed 750,000 German casualties in early December 1941. This total is obviously high but, in comparison, Red Army casualties amounted to almost 5 million by the end of 1941, more than 6 times greater than German losses.

In late November 1941, **it was becoming clear that the possibility of the Germans capturing Moscow was a slim one.** During the first two weeks of November, **Joseph Stalin** had dispatched 21 fresh Soviet divisions from Siberia and Central Asia to the Moscow sector. Before on 5 October 1941, Stalin had decided to create a strategic reserve of 10 armies, most of which were retained for the counter-offensive that was soon to come. The Germans had barely any new divisions to throw into the fighting. The weakened Luftwaffe previously failed to eliminate the Trans-Siberian rail line, across which the fresh reserves of Soviet troops had been transported.

On 28 November 1941, Panzer Group 3 established a foothold over the Moscow-Volga Canal, but it could proceed no further. Over 100 miles to the south of Moscow, the 2nd Panzer Army was unable to capture the city of Tula. This meant that the planned German pincers envelopment of Moscow, from the south-east and the north-west, could not now be implemented. In the first week of December 1941, Panzer Group 4 pushed a division to within 18 miles of Moscow but it was halted by Soviet resistance.

With a last throw of the dice Hitler decided, as Moscow could not be taken by encirclement, that he would wipe the city out by flooding it with water. Hitler compiled an order that was sent to the 33-year-old SS Obersturmfuehrer Otto Skorzeny, who would become one of the most famous – or infamous – soldiers of the war. Hitler’s order

expounded that Skorzeny's unit, belonging to the Das Reich panzer division, should advance to capture the sluices of the reservoir on the Moscow-Volga Canal. They would thereafter open the sluices and "drown" Moscow by turning it into a gigantic artificial lake.

By the start of December 1941 Skorzeny and his men, though they could see the spires of Moscow and the Kremlin in their binoculars, were waist deep in snow and could not advance to carry out Hitler's order. Skorzeny complained how "in spite of the confusion of our logistics and in spite of the bravery of the Russian soldiers, we would have taken Moscow in the beginning of December 1941 if the Siberian troops had not intervened. In the month of December, our Army Group Center did not receive a single division as reinforcement or replacement".

Image on the right: Nazi Germany invading the Soviet Union in Operation Barbarossa, June 22, 1941. *Contunico* © ZDF Enterprises GmbH, Mainz



On the night of 4 December, the temperature near Moscow plunged to minus 31 degrees Celsius and, 24 hours later, the thermometer sank lower still to minus 36. The German soldiers were fighting desperately in the evergreen woods that lay around Moscow, and further progress was impossible. With this halt the truth suddenly hit home.

Army Group Center's final effort to take Moscow had failed, and the failure left it in a most dangerous position. They were holding a front around 600 miles in breadth, and against an enemy which, though it had suffered unprecedented losses, seemed if anything to be growing stronger. The Soviet counter-attack was launched on 5 December 1941, timed beautifully to strike the Germans at their weakest moment.

For all of the vast extent of front, von Bock's army had in reserve a single, understrength division. This was military redundancy, the result of German overconfidence along with Hitler and the high command's willingness to gamble recklessly. Like players who continually doubled their stakes, they faced ruin should the dice fall the wrong way.

With the temperature below minus 30, the panzers and trucks were becoming immobile because the oil in their sumps was freezing solid, and the Germans had very little antifreeze. Their horses were dying from the cold, and the Wehrmacht was still heavily reliant on these animals for transportation. Even the lubricating oil in guns and other weaponry was starting to freeze, rendering them unserviceable. Out of the 26 trains per day, which the German logistics staff calculated were necessary to maintain Army Group Center, only eight to 10 trains were arriving every 24 hours.

So much for the successful eight week campaign envisaged in Barbarossa's planning. From the German viewpoint, the invasion could only be regarded as a monumental failure. The

objective had been to secure a 1,300 mile line from Archangel, in the far north-west of Russia, to the Caspian Sea - running eastwards of Moscow and including nearly all of European Russia. As December 1941 began, the reality was that the depleted German divisions stood outside of Moscow and Leningrad, Soviet Russia's two largest cities; while to the south, German forces were stopped 300 miles west of the Caspian Sea. Neither had the Caucasus region been penetrated, following the German retirement from Rostov-on-Don on 2 December.

What were the reasons for the inability to accomplish any of these aims? No single cause can be put forward but some are more important than others. Barbarossa's strategic planning was inadequate and amateurish. It called for an offensive across an extremely broad front, which served to dilute the force of the attack, and give the Soviet Army time to recover from the opening blows. With Hitler's mark all over it, the German high command had attempted to reach too many targets at the same time (Leningrad, Crimea, Caucasus, Murmansk, Kiev, Moscow, Donbass).

Mitcham observed, "By sending them racing all over Russia, Hitler had contributed greatly to the wear on his panzers. Tank units had less than 50 percent of their authorized strength when Operation Typhoon, the final drive on Moscow, began".

Moscow ranked as Soviet Russia's most important city. Apart from being the USSR's biggest urban area, the capital was its communications, transportation and administrative hub, which enabled each part of the Soviet Army front to be reinforced. Moscow was a vital industrial center and it headquartered the country's all powerful leader, Stalin.

From the invasion's outset on 22 June 1941, had Army Group Center been directed towards Moscow in a single great thrust - and protected on the flanks by Army Groups North and South - the capital may well have fallen at the end of August 1941. Such strategic thoughts were beyond the Nazi hierarchy, luckily for the world. Two months into the invasion, on 21 August, previous strategic mistakes could have been rectified by assigning Moscow primary importance on that date; but Hitler compounded the errors by reasserting the plan to capture numerous objectives. The advance on Moscow was postponed for what would be a critical six weeks (until 2 October 1941).

When Hitler's orders of 21 August were forwarded by telephone on 22 August to Field Marshal von Bock, whose goal had been to capture Moscow, he was very upset. He said it was "unfortunate... All the directives say taking Moscow isn't important!!... I want to smash the enemy army and the bulk of this army is opposite my front!" On 24 August von Bock continued, "They apparently do not wish to exploit under any circumstances the opportunity decisively to defeat the Russians before winter!"

Note the repeated use of exclamation marks by von Bock, a normally cold and unemotional Prussian not given to hysterics. His views here would prove accurate in every sense. General Halder went so far as to say that Hitler's 21 August directive "was decisive to the outcome of this campaign"; and in December 1941 von Bock, having seen his prediction come true, again lambasted the 21 August directive, calling it "a terrible mistake".

There were some other factors, perhaps secondary, behind the German failure. **Russian resistance, military capacity, and resources were much greater than the Nazis had anticipated.** Overall, the quality of Soviet military hardware was impressive, in particular the T-34 medium tank and KV heavy tank. Yet in 1941 there were, combined, only

about 2,000 T-34 and KV tanks available to the Soviets, and most of these had been destroyed before winter by the enemy.

British historian Evan Mawdsley wrote, "In 1941 the Germans were able to cope with the superior number of Soviet tanks, by means of some excellent towed anti-tank guns. The 88mm, which was actually a heavy anti-aircraft gun, gave the Wehrmacht the firepower to knock out even the T-34 and KV". Consequently, the high standard of Soviet armour, in some instances superior to the German, was not a decisive factor in 1941 when the crucial fighting was unfolding.

The Nazis faced increased resistance, at least in part because of the brutality of their rule in the conquered regions. In the Ukraine, for example, the Wehrmacht had initially been welcomed as liberators by a considerable part of the population. Before long, potential allies would evolve into implacable enemies when the true face of Nazi occupation was revealed, and this certainly did not help the Wehrmacht's cause.

The size of the Soviet landmass, far larger than western Europe where the Germans were triumphant the year before, is a sometimes overlooked factor in Barbarossa's failure but it was important. The terrain's vastness was enhanced by German strategic blunders. The Soviet road network was much inferior when compared to the road system in France. This proved a hindrance to the Germans, especially when the heavy rains arrived in the second half of October 1941, turning the ground into rivers of mud.

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