

History of World War II: Operation Barbarossa, Germans Advance into Eastern Ukraine and Crimea

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By late September 1941, it was becoming clear to much of the watching world that the German-led invasion of the USSR had not unfolded as the Nazis expected. Three months into Operation Barbarossa the Soviet Union’s position was still very serious, however.

At this point the Red Army had suffered at least two million casualties, while the Germans had lost a modest 185,000 men, which gives a firm indication of the Wehrmacht’s superiority over the Soviets, in 1941 at least. In north-western Russia, Leningrad was already surrounded from 8 September 1941 by German-Finnish forces. Leningrad was enduring bombardment from the air and the ground, while its inhabitants were being mercilessly starved by blockade. In the coming winter, as much as 100,000 people in Leningrad would die of hunger each month.

To the south, the Ukrainian capital Kiev had fallen on 19 September 1941 to a German pincers movement; as the Red Army suffered an unprecedented loss of around 750,000 men in the Kiev area, the vast majority of them taken prisoner. With Kiev in German hands Army Group South, led by Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, plunged deeper into Ukrainian territory.

As part of Army Group South the German 11th Army, under its new commander Erich von Manstein, occupied Perekop on 27 September 1941, an urban settlement which connects the Ukrainian mainland to the Crimean peninsula. General von Manstein would become one of the Wehrmacht’s most formidable commanders of the war.

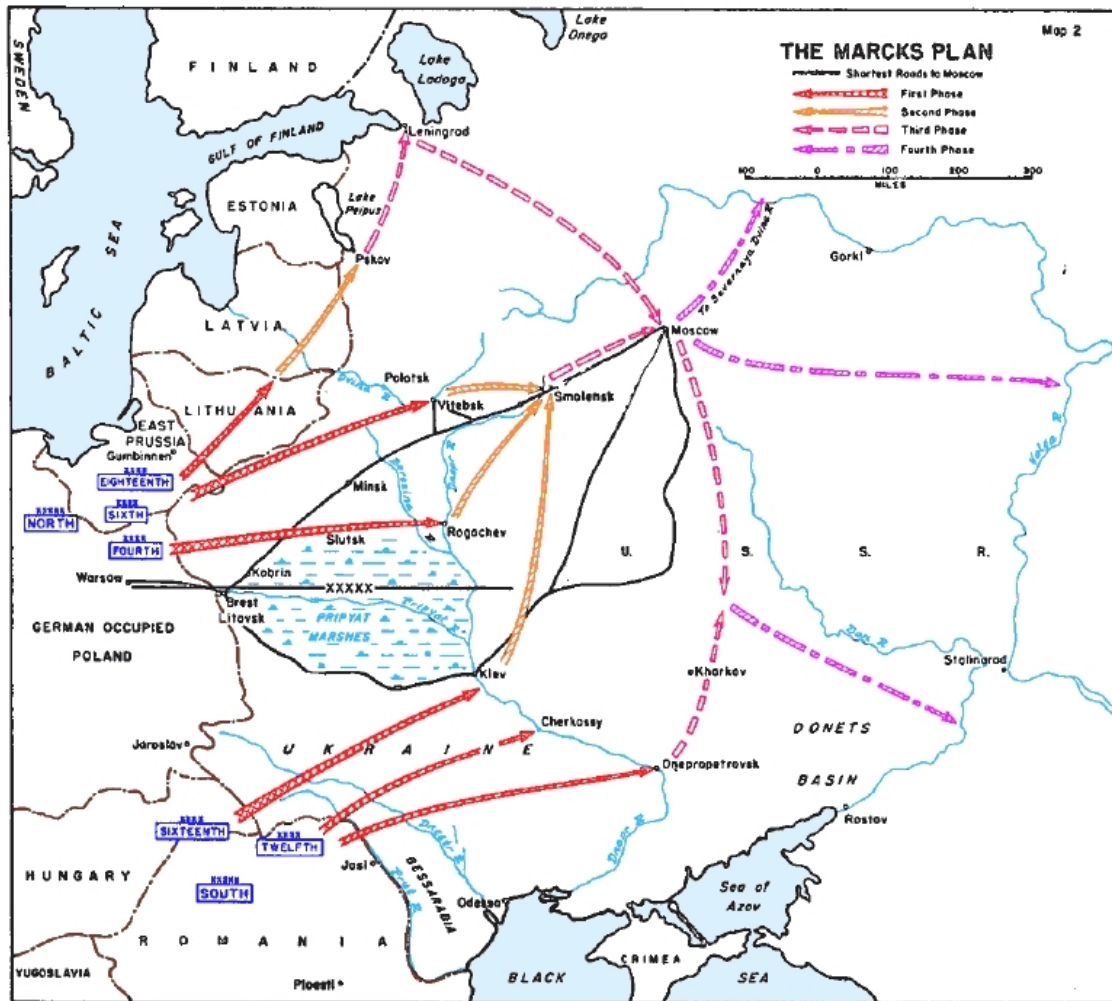
In early October 1941, the German 11th Army proceeded to link up with Ewald von Kleist's Panzer Group 1, now reinforced and called the 1st Panzer Army. They promptly encircled large elements of two Soviet armies east of Melitopol, a city in south-eastern Ukraine and near the Sea of Azov, a body of water slightly greater in size than Belgium. This encounter was, as a result, titled by the Germans as the Battle of the Sea of Azov, a conflict mostly forgotten today.



Elements of the German 3rd Panzer Army on the road near Pruzhany, June 1941 (Source: Public Domain)

As the noose tightened, the German divisions captured over 100,000 Soviet troops beside the Sea of Azov. The Russians lost more than 200 tanks here and almost 800 guns, while the commander of the Soviet 18th Army, General A. K. Smirnov, was killed in action by artillery fire on 8 October 1941. The historian Aleksander A. Maslov wrote of Smirnov, "The Germans who buried the general placed a plywood board on his grave, with an inscription in Russian, German, and Romanian, exhorting their soldiers to fight as bravely as this Soviet soldier".

With their column of panzers and infantrymen stretching for miles across the horizon, the Germans swept up the coast along the Sea of Azov. The 1st Panzer Army captured Berdiansk, a Ukrainian port city, on 6 October 1941. Two days later, just over 40 miles further east along the shoreline, Mariupol fell, on the north coast of the Sea of Azov. The fighting in this region of south-eastern Ukraine ended on 11 October 1941, with a decisive Wehrmacht victory. British scholar Evan Mawdsley acknowledged that the Battle of the Sea of Azov "was certainly one of the half dozen great Red Army defeats of 1941".



Operation Otto Preliminary Plan for Operation Barbarossa -- August 5th, 1940

The Marcks Plan was the original German plan of attack for Operation Barbarossa, as depicted in a US Government study (March 1955). (Source: Public Domain)

The advance itself astride the Sea of Azov continued, as the Germans crossed the Ukrainian frontier into south-western Russia. On 17 October 1941, two SS divisions from the 1st Panzer Army reached Taganrog, home to around 200,000 inhabitants. The SS divisions were followed from behind by Wehrmacht soldiers.

The German 11th Army had, meanwhile, marched westwards to join forces with Marshal Ion Antonescu's Romanian 4th Army, which had surrounded Odessa in southern Ukraine and on the Black Sea. The engagement here revealed some serious flaws in the Romanians' fighting capabilities, and they were grateful to see the German 11th Army arrive. After two months of stoic opposition, Odessa fell on 16 October 1941 as the Soviet Army retreated from the city.

In following days the Romanian forces, assisted by SS units, would murder tens of thousands of Odessa's Jewish inhabitants (the Odessa massacre). About half of Odessa's Jewish population got out of the city in time. Yitzhak Arad, the former Soviet resistance fighter, wrote that "Odessa had the largest Jewish community with a population of over 205,000" and "between 108,000 to 110,000" of these residents "were evacuated".

Through August and September 1941, the majority of Red Army reserves had been shifted

by Joseph Stalin to the crucial Moscow theatre in the center. Von Rundstedt's Army Group South, in part because of this, made steady progress. Army Group South's advance was threatening the eastern Ukrainian city of Kharkov, a great industrial center, while under peril too was the Donbass, an important coal-mining area along with Rostov-on-Don, a Russian city considered to be "the gateway to the Caucasus" and its oil fields.

In the drive towards Kharkov, the Soviet Union's fourth largest metropolis, the German 6th Army captured Sumy on 10 October 1941. The 6th Army was led by Field Marshal Walter von Reichenau, a committed Nazi, and having taken Sumy they were 90 miles from Kharkov. The Jewish Virtual Library (JVL), an encyclopedia detailing Jewish history, outlined that von Reichenau "encouraged his soldiers to commit atrocities against Jews in the territory under his control".

Kharkov was in a dire position. Not only was the German 6th Army advancing rapidly towards the city, but Kharkov's population had swollen to over a million people, as Soviet citizens previously fled from other areas to avoid Nazi occupation. Kharkov's pre-war populace was 840,000, but some estimates state that by September 1941 it almost doubled to 1.5 million.

On 15 October 1941, the Germans took the town of Okhtyrka, just over 60 miles north-west of Kharkov. Twenty-four hours later Bohodukhiv was taken, less than 40 miles from Kharkov. In following days the German 6th Army continued to move forward and, by 20 October, the Soviets completed their evacuation of industrial enterprises from the city. Four days later, on 24 October, von Reichenau's men entered Kharkov and swiftly captured the city.

Kharkov's demise came as a considerable blow. It was an industrial stronghold, where the Soviet T-34 tank had been produced at the Kharkov Tank Factory. Von Reichenau, upon inspecting a captured T-34 tank, reportedly said "If the Russians ever produce it on an assembly line we will have lost the war". He would certainly have been disconcerted to know that, even with the loss of Kharkov, the Soviets built 12,000 T-34 tanks in 1942. Nevertheless, there were fewer than 1,000 T-34s available when the Germans invaded in June 1941; and most of those were destroyed when the really critical fighting was taking place in 1941. With Kharkov subdued, the German 6th Army proceeded to occupy the Donbass in south-eastern Ukraine.

The 1st Panzer Army, supported by the German 17th Army, was marching towards Donetsk (Stalino), 155 miles south of Kharkov. Although the Germans were hampered by supply issues and the start of the autumn rains, they captured Donetsk on 20 October 1941.

By mid-October von Manstein's 11th Army was free to advance into the Crimean peninsula. Hitler had stated in his 21 August 1941 directive, "The Crimea has colossal importance for the protection of oil supplies from Romania. Therefore, it is necessary to employ all available means, including mobile formations, to force the lower reaches of the Dnepr rapidly before the enemy is able to reinforce his forces".

In late October 1941, the panzers broke clear into the Crimea with a costly frontal assault. On 1 November the German 11th Army took Simferopol, the Crimea's second biggest city. On 9 November the Wehrmacht captured Yalta, the southern Crimean resort city, and one of the Soviet Union's most popular holiday destinations. Stalin held possession of a residence in Yalta and he had vacationed there in the summers.

A week after Yalta fell, on 16 November 1941 the German 11th Army occupied Kerch, a coastal city in eastern Crimea. The Germans had overrun almost all of the Crimea and, in doing so, they destroyed 16 Soviet divisions and captured more than 100,000 Red Army troops. Yet the Crimea's largest city, Sevastapol, in the peninsula's far south-west, remained in Russian hands for the time being and was effectively a fortress. Sevastapol was bolstered by the Soviet garrison which had been evacuated from Odessa in October.

The German 6th Army took the Russian city of Kursk on 3 November 1941. Army Group South had now established a line stretching more than 300 miles across, extending along Kursk-Kharkov-Donetsk-Taganrog. Hitler's attention in this region turned further east again to Rostov-on-Don. Rostov contained over half a million people and lay 245 miles south-west of Stalingrad. The taking of Rostov would enable the Wehrmacht to advance towards the Caucasus and Stalingrad.

Luckily for the Germans, in early November 1941 the heavy Russian rainfall (rasputitsa) stopped, to be replaced by clearer weather and colder conditions. With the presence of light frost, the soil hardened and this allowed the panzers, trucks and motorcycles to shift into gear and move across the ground with relative ease.

The German 3rd Army Corps raced ahead to take Rostov, but Sepp Dietrich's SS "Adolf Hitler" motorised division entered the city first. Rostov was captured on 21 November 1941. Nearby, the Germans seized intact the railway bridge over the frozen Don River. They were further able to cut the Caucasus oil pipelines, which Soviet Russia was heavily dependent on.

The Russians, correctly discerning the importance of this sector, launched fierce counterattacks across the Don River against the German positions in Rostov. Soviet casualties were severe, as were the German, and they were too heavy for the latter to endure. Field Marshal von Rundstedt, in overall command of all German divisions in the south-western USSR, asked Hitler for permission to retreat from Rostov.

The 65-year-old von Rundstedt was also a very experienced officer, but Hitler refused his request, and the former resigned in protest on 1 December 1941. Von Reichenau, previously the 6th Army commander, replaced von Rundstedt at the head of Army Group South.

Assessing the situation at Rostov, von Reichenau immediately came to the same conclusion as his predecessor: he therefore asked Hitler for authorisation to retire from Rostov. On 2 December 1941, Hitler took a flight from East Prussia to Mariupol, not far from Rostov and just 60 miles from the front line, in an attempt to resolve the problem himself.

Entering a world with driving blizzards and subzero temperatures, this was a far cry from what Hitler was used to at his Wolfsschanze headquarters, sheltered in the dense Masurian woods. Hitler realised the extent of the crisis and gave way to von Reichenau's arguments. In early December, the Germans relinquished Rostov.

In some confusion, the invaders retreated 30 miles or so westwards, to a winter line behind the Mius River. It was the first major German reverse of the Nazi-Soviet War. Stalin was delighted at these developments and he publicly praised "the victory over the enemy and liberation of Rostov from the German-fascist aggressors".

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Featured image: German troops at the Soviet state border marker, 22 June 1941 (Source: Public Domain)

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