

History of World War II: Operation Barbarossa. The Roots of Its Failure

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Global Research, May 14, 2021

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

Theme: [History](#)

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Operation Barbarossa, whose 80th anniversary falls next month, was the largest military operation ever undertaken. This German invasion of the Soviet Union proved to be the decisive confrontation of the Second World War, and the effects of its outcome lasts to the current day.

The Austrian-born autocrat, **Adolf Hitler**, embarked upon his wars of conquest without firstly placing the German nation on a Total War footing. Hitler’s refusal from 1939, to direct the Third Reich’s full resources towards military means, was a critical reason behind the Nazis’ eventual defeat. Hitler’s regime made moves in enacting Total War policies only from early 1943, after the disaster at Stalingrad, and at least two years too late.

Hitler had ignored the theories of his predecessor as dictator, **General Erich Ludendorff**. He was the German Empire’s ruling warlord from August 1916 to October 1918, and during the mid-1920s he had been a political ally of Hitler. The Ludendorff biographer and historian, Lt. Col. Donald J. Goodspeed, recognised that the general “possessed outstanding military talent”. (1)

Ludendorff was a strong proponent of Total War from the early 20th century, and he believed that a country’s combined assets – including every fit man, woman and adolescent – must be engineered towards the business of war, on the battlefield or in the armament factories, and that peace is merely an interlude between conflicts. For Ludendorff, “The total state and total mobilisation provided essential preconditions for fighting successful war”. (2)

In 1935, the 70-year-old Ludendorff re-entered German national consciousness when he completed his book and life’s work titled, *Der Totale Krieg* (The Total War). In it he insisted, “War is the highest expression of the national will to live, and therefore politics must serve war-making”.

Hitler read Ludendorff’s book, but the latter’s beliefs pertaining to Total War were not accepted by the Third Reich’s General Staff. They felt Ludendorff’s views to be too ruthless and extreme (3). His doctrines on waging conflict were undoubtedly that, yet all wars of aggression are ruthless and extreme. By the mid-1930s Ludendorff had long since fallen out with Hitler. The general criticised the Nazis in pamphlets that he wrote from his home in

Bavaria, and in a small newspaper which he established; his attacks were due, in part, because Ludendorff felt Hitler was too soft on Roman Catholic influence in Germany (4). Ludendorff was the only person in the Reich who was allowed to rebuke the Nazis with impunity.

Analysing Ludendorff's Total War views, Dr Jan Willem Honig, a senior lecturer in War Studies at King's College London, outlined that "Ludendorff's concept of Total War shows how well he had internalised the shift in the political rationalisation of war, and the resulting need for its means and methods to change". (5)

Ludendorff's advocacy of maximising a country's productivity to fight wars was, in effect, supported by **Albert Speer**, the so-called "Good Nazi" and one of the less sinister men among Hitler's top brass. Speer was initially an architect by trade, but on 8 February 1942 he had been appointed by Hitler as Minister of Armaments and Munitions. From 1942 until war's end, Speer was one of the Reich's most powerful men.

In Spandau Prison on 29 March 1947, Speer wrote a highly significant passage stating,

"In the middle of 1941, Hitler could easily have had an army equipped twice as powerfully as it was. For the production of those fundamental industries that determine the volume of armaments was scarcely higher in 1941 than in 1944. What would have kept us from attaining the later production figures by the spring of 1942? We could even have mobilised approximately three million more men of the younger age groups before 1942 without losses in production - nor would we have needed forced labour from the occupied territories, if women could have been brought into the labour force, as they were in England and the United States. Some five million women would have been available for armaments production; and three million additional men would have added up to many divisions. These, moreover, could have been excellently equipped as a result of the increased production". (6)

The above had escaped Hitler at the time, it seems. Hitler had no trade to speak of, having been prevented in his late teens from entering the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. He did not have the necessary qualifications either to pursue a career in architecture, as his secondary school studies went uncompleted. Maybe it was this more than anything, which ensured that Hitler later became a superficial expert in various fields, a dilettante with an aptitude for perceptive and amateurish reasoning.

Speer noted on 6 May 1960,

"Someone ought to write on Hitler's dilettantism some day. He had the ignorance, the curiosity, the enthusiasm and the temerity of the born dilettante; and along with that, inspiration, imagination, lack of bias. In short, if I had to find a phrase to fit him, to sum him up aptly and succinctly, I would say that he was a genius of dilettantism". (7)

Hitler's dilettantism extended inevitably to the military arena. Due to having seemingly no other prospects, he remained in the German armed forces until 31 March 1920. With the First World War over, he showed no ambition to rise through the army's ranks beyond that of lance-corporal. From the spring of 1920, Hitler chose instead to enter politics and worked for the new Nazi Party. In following years, he became a skilled and unscrupulous politician but would remain inexperienced in military matters.

When Ludendorff assumed the de facto German dictatorship in autumn 1916, he almost immediately set about instituting Total War measures, at first by issuing a compulsory labour law. For the war's remainder, every German male aged between 15 and 60 was pressed into the service of the state. The Canadian historian Goodspeed observed, "Before the year [1916] was out, the labour law considerably eased Germany's manpower shortage", and it was "One of his most important - and unpopular - measures" (8). Ludendorff himself acknowledged that his Total War strategy was indeed not well liked, but for him there was too much at stake, and the German masses did not revolt at his harsh methods.

Moreover, Ludendorff employed large numbers of German women in the munitions plants after August 1916. Compulsory enrolling of women in the arms industry is, of course, essential to a more effective prosecution of a modern war economy. The percentage of females in any nation's populace amounts to at least 50%, and those of working age perhaps 30% or more. Not to make use of the considerable abilities of women is an enormous waste. Nazi policy towards women was sexist and domineering, viewing their positions in society as strictly mother and wife who belonged in the homestead.

From the Second World War's outset in September 1939, Hitler had been afraid to implement Total War policies, for fear that it would affect his standing with the German public. He lacked the single-minded focus of the military fanatic who wants to direct everything towards winning the war. Into 1942 and beyond, the Hitler regime continued to dither and organise the war in a dilettantish fashion; most starkly, by making scant use of the millions of German females.

In the spring of 1942 businessmen met with the armaments minister Speer, and showed him statistics proving that employment of German women was much higher during World War I, when Ludendorff was in charge. Photographs were produced of female workers streaming out of factories in 1918, whereas photos of the same plants in 1942 revealed scarcely any women. (9)

In early April 1942, with this vital issue on his mind Speer went to see Fritz Sauckel, the General Plenipotentiary for Labour Deployment. Speer proposed to Sauckel that they recruit women en masse to be deployed in the factories. Sauckel's response was not conciliatory, but he sought a meeting on the topic with Hermann Göring, president of the Reichstag.

Sauckel expounded to Göring that factory work could affect the "psychic and emotional life" of German girls, along with their ability to bear children. Göring agreed with him. Speer recalled how "to be absolutely sure, Sauckel went to Hitler immediately after the conference and had him confirm the decision. All my good arguments were thereby blown to the winds" (10). Almost two years later on 28 January 1944, and 12 months after the Stalingrad defeat, Speer sent a withering message to Sauckel whereby the war minister outlined "the employment of women has progressed much further in England than here". (11)

Regarding the manpower of Wehrmacht forces, by May 1940 as they attacked France and the Low Countries, it consisted of around 3.5 million German soldiers, according to the influential British military historian, Basil Liddell Hart (12). From 1939, a complete mobilisation could have produced another two or three million German troops by the summer of 1940, as was the case the next year. In the event, 3.5 million was more than adequate to rout a decaying French Army. In how they were used the following summer,

roughly the same figure was not enough for a repeat outcome in the Soviet Union, a far larger country whose soldiers did not collapse like the French.

Hitler had in 1925 declared in *Mein Kampf* “when we speak of new territory in Europe today we must think principally of Russia, and her border vassal states” (13). Hitler first seriously began to plan out his dream of expanding eastwards 15 years later, from July 1940. His increased focus on the Soviet Union had been influenced too by circumstances, as Britain was stubbornly resisting him which he found confusing; but his decision to attack Russia was cemented before London’s rejection of his peace offer, as Captain Liddell Hart realised (14). On 21 July 1940 Hitler asked Field Marshal Walther von Brauchitsch, the German Army Commander-in-Chief, to advise him on the possibility of invading Soviet Russia in the autumn of 1940.



Clockwise from top left: German soldiers advance through Northern Russia, German flamethrower team in the Soviet Union, Soviet planes flying over German positions near Moscow, Soviet prisoners of war on the way to German prison camps, Soviet soldiers fire at German positions. (CC BY-SA 3.0)

Eight days later, on 29 July, Hitler nevertheless informed his Chief of Operations **Alfred Jodl** that an attack on Russia, in August or September 1940, was no longer logistically practical. It was too late in the year, with the Russian autumn rains and winter snow on the horizon.

Hitler said to General Jodl that the invasion would have to be postponed for a few months.

On 31 July 1940, an important conference was held at the Berghof residence in the Bavarian Alps. Among those in attendance were Brauchitsch and Jodl along with Hitler's close military adviser, Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel. Hitler said that a German victory over Russia would compel the English to come to terms with them, and he further remarked, "England's hope is Russia and America. If hope of Russia disappears, America disappears too" (15). Keitel was one of few to later advise against attacking Russia, because the 58-year-old field marshal foresaw the risks involved, but though Hitler respected his opinion he did not accept it on this subject.

Despite having over 10 months to prepare for the invasion of Russia, the final details for Operation Barbarossa were poorly worked out and grossly ambitious in scope. German reconnaissance estimates of enemy strength were faulty and based mainly on guesswork. This lack of knowledge seeped through to the highest echelon of the German command. Austrian Lt. Col. Otto Skorzeny, who freed Italian dictator Benito Mussolini from captivity on 12 September 1943, wrote in early 1975, "Hitler certainly made grave errors in his appraisal of the war situation - but primarily because he was badly informed". (16)

There is no doubt that Hitler was misled on Soviet fighting capacity, but he initially allowed himself to be. It suited his prejudices against Bolshevism and the Slavic race, reflected by the brutal and exploitative manner of the invasion which he stressed to his generals was necessary.

Top ranking figures such as **General Franz Halder**, Chief of Staff of the German Army High Command, had played a central role in unwittingly misinforming Hitler. At the invasion's beginning, the 56-year-old Halder led Hitler to believe there were 200 Red Army divisions in existence. Subsequently on 11 August 1941 Halder admitted in his diary "up to now we have already counted 360" (17). Less than two months into the attack, Soviet troop numbers were almost double the size of what Halder had predicted. With Hitler's agreement and input, the experienced Halder had prepared both the planning and execution of Operation Barbarossa.

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)



When receiving a solid picture of realities on the ground, Hitler demonstrated an

expertise for grasping complex problems with ease and explaining them clearly. Recalling his stay at Hitler's compound near Rastenburg, East Prussia from 10 September 1944, Skorzeny wrote that, "During my three days at the Wolfsschanze I was astonished, not only by Hitler's extraordinary memory, but by the intuitive sense he possessed for military and political situations, their possible developments and eventual solutions of the problems associated with them. General Jodl knew how to present a military situation. But when Hitler spoke afterwards, everything was much simpler and clearer". (18)

German military intelligence did not make Hitler aware either that, from the high summer of 1941, the Soviets were successfully achieving a vast relocation of industrial capacity further east - in order to safeguard and strengthen Russian war capabilities against the Nazi onslaught. John Sweeney, professor emeritus of geography at Maynooth University in Ireland, wrote of the Soviet initiatives, "Over 1,500 industrial enterprises were transplanted between July and November 1941 alone to what were considered relatively safe refuges in the interior. The Urals (which received 667 of these enterprises), Kazakhstan and Central Asia (308), West Siberia (244), the Volga Region (226) and East Siberia (78) benefited permanently from this massive injection of industrial investment, and it was in this heartland area that urban growth during the post-war recovery period was concentrated". (19)

Focusing on the misjudgments of people like General Halder relating to Russian manpower, there was hardly an excuse for it. The Russian Empire conducted its first census in January 1897, 44 years before Barbarossa, and it stated that its population amounted to 125 million (20). This was more than the 109 million living in Nazi Germany and its occupied regions in 1940. Tsarist Russia could have fielded more divisions than Hitler's Reich, and Russia's population would grow in coming decades.

The next full census was held under the Soviets in December 1926 - before Joseph Stalin had consolidated his rule in 1928 - and it showed that the USSR's population was 147 million (21). The results were soon published, and military figures or historians in Nazi Germany could have unearthed it if they had tried.

Another Soviet census was taken in January 1937, which found that the population had climbed again and was 162 million; this census result was unknown outside of the Kremlin, Stalin refused to put it to print as he expected the total to be higher; a final pre-war Soviet census was conducted in January 1939, claiming that 170 million people lived there.

The population of the USSR's two largest cities, Moscow and Leningrad, had together risen by 3.6 million from 1926 to 1939. Sweeney, who is commonly regarded as Ireland's foremost climate scientist, wrote that the rapid population increase in Moscow and Leningrad was "a remarkable fact considering the very low contribution made to this total by natural increase". (22)

Sweeney noted that the unprecedented growth in Soviet urban populations occurred largely due to "a massive influx to the older centres of European Russia" and was "primarily attributable to an exodus from the land rather than any natural increase in the pre-existing urban population". (23)

Some details of the 1939 Soviet census were printed in the Russian press. Key passages from it were discussed, for example, in a spring 1941 study published in London with the

Journal of the Royal Statistical Society, weeks before Barbarossa (24). Apparently no-one in positions of power in Berlin were made aware of such accounts.

This report printed with the Royal Statistical Society was written by a Russian-born lecturer and naturalised British citizen, named Sergey Petrovich Turin, or S. P. Turin (originally Tyurin). In his account, Turin revealed that the Soviet population in 1941 “is about 193 million people” (25). Its populace had increased further since 1939, because Stalin absorbed into USSR territory the eastern half of Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, while he also took over 9% of Finnish land.

As the German invasion was launched, the Soviet population was nearly twice larger than the Third Reich’s. Huge numbers of Soviet divisions should have come as little surprise to the German hierarchy. All too late, General Halder wrote in his diary on 11 August 1941, “we destroy a dozen of them [Soviet divisions], then the Russians put another dozen in their place”.

Hitler was likewise misinformed by Nazi intelligence on Soviet armament strength. In mid-August 1941, Hitler confided to the Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels that he had “estimated the number of Soviet tanks as 5,000, when in reality they had around 20,000. We thought they had about 10,000 aircraft, in fact they had over 20,000” (26). On 4 June 1942 Hitler told Finland’s Commander-in-Chief, Gustav Mannerheim, that he had since learnt the Soviets actually possessed “35,000 tanks” in the second half of 1941. (27)

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Notes

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27 ElMehdi El Azhary, "Hitler's Only Known Interview", Medium, [15 March 2021](#)

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