

## Hitler, the Rise of Nazism, and Appeasement.

Since Adolph Hitler's ascendency to power in 1933 until his invasion of Soviet Russia on 22 June 1941, the German Army demonstrated with unequivocal success how new strategies, tactics, and technologies had given rise to an unprecedented era of operational warfare. Harnessing the speed and power of innovative concepts for highly mobile and mechanized warfare, the German Army successfully crushed Poland, Norway, Denmark, Belgium, Luxembourg, Holland, France, and the British Expeditionary Force at Dunkirk. It seemed as though Europe was on the verge of capitulating under total German hegemony, until Hitler made the decision to attack Soviet Russia and thereby opened a second front for Germany.

Some may argue that the decision to invade Soviet Russia was based on sound strategic judgment. However, no matter how compelling the tangible evidence may be for success, nothing suggests that the total destruction of the Soviet Army and occupation of Russia could be accomplished within the confines of Nazi operational warfare and subjugation.<sup>1</sup> The historical examples chosen for comparison include the invasion of Russia by Napoleon I in 1812, coincidentally launched only one day later on 23 June, and the defeat of Czarist Russia during World War I. However, both these examples must be weighed in relation to their post-war periods, the former example based on a hypothetical outcome. How would the victors administer a defeated country of territorial abundance such as Russia? Neither example would suggest that the invasion of Soviet Russia would be feasible. While the German operational success on the Eastern Front during World War I and the debut of the Soviets forces during the Russo-Finnish War of 1939-40 may have given Hitler reason to believe that Soviet resistance could be quickly overcome, he did not lack considerations for the elements of friction. He did, however, underestimate the tenacity of the Soviet defensive fighting spirit and the severity and effect of the Russian terrain and weather on military operations. Above all, Hitler was not a realist and would only see things as he wanted, no matter what the condition was in reality. To answer the initial question, the following should be considered; did Hitler have a strategic goal? (yes) Did Hitler have the means to achieve his goal? (until the summer of 1941, yes) And did the terrain and weather stop the German Army? (no) In light of these considerations, and to the surprise of Stalin who estimated that the war with Germany would not begin until 1942,<sup>2</sup> Hitler invaded Russia with sound strategic judgment.

The example of Napoleon in 1812 discloses the operational difficulties of how terrain and

---

<sup>1</sup> In conquering a country, the German Army first destroyed the enemy military forces and was then followed by the SD (*Sicherheits Dienst*) that systematically rounded up all suspects opposed to the Nazis, many of whom were murdered. The SD was a branch of the SS (*Schutz Staffel*). Subjugation by force, violence, and terror was the Nazi-brand of occupation. See Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, *Lost Victories*, (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1994), pp. 175-76.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Stalin, nick-named Uncle Joe, underestimated the impatience of Hitler. He did not expect Hitler to launch an attack on Russia until the war in the west was concluded. Additionally, Stalin did not liken Hitler to gamble everything by attacking before 1942, see Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, (New York, 1994), p. 364. Also see Alex De Jonge, *Stalin: And the Shaping of the Soviet Union*, (New York: Quill, 1986), pp. 378-79.

weather can severely hamper the ability to supply an army over long lines of communications and diminish an army's fighting capability when attacking deep into enemy territory. When Napoleon invaded Russia on 23 June 1812, he did so with specific strategic goals. He wanted to bring Alexander to terms of the Treaty of Tilsit of 1807, ensure Russian adherence to the Continental System, and their acceptance of a subordinate position to France. These goals were in stark contrast to the revolutionary concepts of overthrowing the social order of the Russian country and its people. Instead of defeating Russia politically from within, a method to which Napoleon should have gravitated, he chose to pursue a purely military strategy. Napoleon's second goal was an extension of the first with strategic implications; the defeat of his *real* enemy, Great Britain.<sup>3</sup> Entering Russia with approximately half a million men, of which more than half were either German, Poles, or Italians, Napoleon sought to defeat Alexander by way of the decisive battle. The decisive battle, however, was never made available to Napoleon who relentlessly pushed deeper and deeper into the heart of Russia.

The Russian forces available to resist Napoleon were scattered across Russia so that no large force could be concentrated at any given point. The Russians were outnumbered about 2 to 1, and the speed of the French advance left no alternative for the Russians than to retreat. By 28 June, Napoleon had reached Viliya where he hoped to engage the Russians in decisive battle. The Russians continued to fall back and by 26 July, Napoleon reached Vitbesk and faced the same dilemma. By the middle of August the Russians had fallen back to Smolensk, now approximately 500 kilometers from the French invasion point near the East Prussian border. A two-day battle was fought at Smolensk that took approximately 10,000 casualties from both sides until the Russians fell back even further. For Napoleon, this was the worst outcome imaginable. Even though supplies had been stockpiled for an army of 400,000 troops and 50,000 horses, Napoleon had only enough supplies to last for 24 days. By this time, French winter quarters were to have been established in Smolensk to allow additional supplies to be brought in. As the Russians abandoned the city they left behind a rubble of scorched earth that offered no shelter or additional provisions. The French forces that had already suffered from desertion, disease, and loss of equipment, due to the poor road and weather conditions, was now hurt even more. Of the deplorable conditions commensurate with the fighting on the Eastern Front in 1812, one French Lieutenant gave the following observation;

...we were embarked on a strenuous campaign entailing frequent forced marches along abominable roads, either smothered in sand or knee-deep in mud and frequently pitted by precipitous gulleys [sic], under skies alternately unbearably hot or pouring forth freezing rain ... many regiments had no more than three days' supply of rations, which, because of

---

<sup>3</sup> The Treaty of Tilsit of 1807 was a ploy by Napoleon and Alexander to dominate Europe. The peace divided Europe into two spheres that were French in the West and Russian in the East. For information regarding the Napoleonic invasion of Russia, consulted was Janet M. Hartely, *Alexander I*, (New York: Logman Group, 1994), pg 111.

the total devastation of the countryside, could never be adequately replenished.<sup>4</sup>

By the beginning of September, the Russians had withdrawn as far as Borodino, about 150 kilometers west of Moscow, where they decided to make a stand. While the French Army had suffered considerable losses along the way, they could only muster approximately 135,000 men and 587 cannon. At Borodino, the casualties were high on both sides, but the Russians managed to elude Napoleon again. The Russians retreated south and allowed the French to enter Moscow only to find a deserted city. Despite the mounting pressure on Alexander by the nobility and his advisors to sue for peace, he continued to resist all of Napoleon's offers. As a result of constant Russian partisan and peasant attacks, Napoleon could not maintain his presence in Moscow. The plight of the French Army had only begun as they left Moscow and moved along a southerly route of retreat in hopes of finding badly needed supplies. On 24-25 October, in the battle of Maloiaroslavets, Napoleon was forced to retrace his steps back to Smolensk. Fighting a severe winter, partisans, and peasants along the way, the French reentered Smolensk in November only to find a completely ravaged and devastated city. By December, less than 50,000 men reached Prussian soil, ending the worst debacle Napoleon had suffered from which he could not recover.<sup>5</sup>

The defeat of Napoleon in Russia was not as a result of a clash of arms, a decisive battle, or the destruction of any large body of forces in a test of tactical skill. Rather, it was a battle that would be determined by operational warfare (logistics). Janet M. Hartley, in her book *Alexander I*, claims that Napoleon's Grande Armée was destroyed by a combination of battle casualties, partisans and peasant attrition, disease and cold.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the French suffered no more than a fourth of their strength as a result of actual battle, while roughly 250,000 were lost due to the weather, sickness, fatigue, poor logistics, and general attrition. Carl von Clausewitz examines the battle of 1812 extensively in his book, *On War*, and points out that Napoleon's failures lay in beginning the campaign too late (which meant that he faced the possibility of winter weather sooner), squandering his army by his choice in tactics, his neglect in matters pertaining to supply, his line of retreat, and for having stayed too long in Moscow. In sum, Clausewitz claims that the only way Napoleon could have succeeded was to destroy the Russian military and capture Moscow.<sup>7</sup> The Russian forces eluded destruction with the help of the terrain and the harsh

---

<sup>4</sup> Hartley, *Alexander I*, 112-13. The approximate number of French soldiers was compared with Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, Princeton Original Paperback, 1989), and Hermann Kinde and Werner Hilgemann, *The Atlas of World History: From the French Revolution to the American Revolution*, volume II, (New York: Doubleday, 1966). Hartley's numbers are somewhat lower and an average figure has been chosen.

<sup>5</sup> Hartley, *Alexander I*, 114-19.

<sup>6</sup> Hartley, *Alexander I*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 627-28. Once Napoleon defeated a country, he did not occupy the country with large numbers of military forces. The peace terms usually left the rulers in power but subservient to Napoleon under his Continental System. While Clausewitz maintains that Napoleon failed to understand that Russia was a country

weather conditions that had a devastating and demoralizing effect on the French.

When considering the extensive Russian withdrawals that caused Napoleon such frustration, Clausewitz specifically addresses the Russian retreat and entitled it accordingly, "Retreat to the Interior of the Country." It should be mentioned that this study should have been of great consideration for Hitler when planning the invasion of Soviet Russia, code named *Barbarossa*. Clausewitz begins the chapter with a sentence that, for all practical purposes, summarizes the Napoleonic invasion in 1812. "We regard a voluntary withdrawal to the interior of the country as a special form of indirect resistance- a form that destroys the enemy not so much by the sword as by his own exertions." His conclusion validates the concept that as an attacker advances their strength diminishes and asserts, "military history has shown it to be true in every campaign in which great distances were covered." Other subtleties from Clausewitz's case study that show the advantages of retreating into the interior of a country include the strengthening of the defender through reinforcements; and the means of collecting supplies at prearranged points while the attacker must have them forwarded to them. The withdrawing army is usually first to reach local resources (living off the land). The resources are then usually exhausted and all that is left behind are devastated towns and the invader is faced with serious shortcomings from the onset. Clausewitz states the following,

There can be no doubt that when the distance involved are long, and the strength of the belligerents not too unequal, a relative state of forces will result that offers the defender far greater prospects of success than a decisive battle on the frontier. But it is not the mere prospect of a victory that is increased through the change in relative strengths; the altered situation will increase the impact of that victory as well. Indeed, the condition of the invader at the end of his course is often such that even a *victory* can force him to retreat; he may not have enough reserves to follow up his success and make the most of it, nor can he hope to replace his losses.<sup>10</sup>

Looking back on the past, Clausewitz's statement was an exact prophecy of what would occur between 1941 and 1945. It is almost incredulous that Hitler did not heed the teachings of Clausewitz. Surprisingly enough, Hitler made some of the same mistakes that Napoleon did, which included launching the offensive too late in the year. More importantly, he did not pay enough attention to the logistical aspects of the campaign. Hitler's hopes for success may have been fueled by two examples in particular that include the operational failure of the Russians

---

that could not be completely occupied, and certainly not with the Grande Armée; this may be a misunderstanding on the part of Clausewitz as to the method of Napoleonic rule.

<sup>8</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 469.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 469-70.

forces during World War I, and the successful resistance of the Finns during the Russo-Finnish War in 1939-40.

Once the Russians had mobilized two armies in 1914 and entered East Prussia to envelop the German Eighth Army, the Russians began to display signs of poor organization and operational inefficiency. As a result of Russian confusion and over-extension, the Germans succeeded in a double-envelopment at Tannenberg and destroyed the Russian Second Army of General Alexander V. Samsonov. One week later on September 8-9, the Russian First Army of General Paul Elder von Rennenkampf was driven from East Prussia after a German victory at the Masurian Lakes. The German victory on the Eastern Front can be attributed, foremost, to the Russians own inability. They lacked organization, command and control, intelligence, logistics, and communications.<sup>11</sup> By September 1914, the German aim on the Eastern Front was to drive the Russians back to the borders of Peter the Great in order to consolidate many of the scattered German elements in Russia and create a German controlled sphere in the east.<sup>12</sup> By 1915, the Eastern Front had brought the greatest gains to the German war effort and exposed the breakdown of the Russian Army. Russian soldiers went to the front without rifles and were expected to pick up the rifles of their fallen comrades. With no artillery ammunition to support infantry assaults, human waves upon waves were sacrificed and resulted in the influx of desertions and malingering. Under the pressure from Bolshevik propaganda and general revolution in Russia, by November 1917 the Russian Stavka (High Command) concluded that the army is simply a huge, weary, shabby, and ill-fed mob of angry men united by their common thirst for peace and by common disappointment.<sup>13</sup> On 3 March 1918, the German Eastern Imperium was converted into reality during the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. Military involvement, however, did not cease after the treaty was ratified. The Ukraine was separated from Russia and German troops were stationed in the Crimea. The treaty placed over fifty-five million people under German control, as German military forces were needed to assist in the occupation, for the protection of newly established independent state governments, and the suppression of resistance to the new form of political and economic imperialism. The conflict transformed into a different struggle, that of an ideological battle that according to Lenin, "will be settled in the rear, not the trenches... Germany will have to maintain larger, not fewer, forces in the east."<sup>14</sup> While the operational ability of the Russian Army was substantially flawed in almost every aspect, the German Army was required to keep a respectable presence in Russia after the Brest-Litovsk period. This example should have given Hitler some indication of what to expect from the

---

<sup>11</sup> Bernadette E. Schmidt and Harold C. Vedeler, *The World in the Crucible 1914-1918*, reprinted NWC, (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), pp. 56-58.

<sup>12</sup> Andreas Hillgruber, *Germany and the Two World Wars*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 44-47.

<sup>13</sup> Schmidt and Vedeler, *World in the Crucible*, 196-97.

<sup>14</sup> Hillgruber, 47; Schmidt and Vedeler, *World in the Crucible*, 197-98.

Bolsheviks and how to the revolution would influence the ideological struggle.

In the Russo-Finnish War of 1939-40, the Finnish Army, with German assistance, made a spectacular effort to resist a series of botched Soviet attacks until they were finally overwhelmed by the sheer weight of the Red Army. The Red Army relied on the old tactical tradition of mass and applied it against even the slightest opposition that resulted in thousands of Soviets lives lost. The field commanders lacked leadership, the level of training was inconsistent, intelligence was poor, and planning ineffective. Of the 600,000 Soviets that crossed into Finland, approximately 240,000 were killed and 250,000 wounded, as opposed to about 70,000 Finns in both categories combined. According to William R. Trotter, author of the *A Frozen Hell: The Russo-Finnish Winter War 1939-40*,

So poorly had the Red Army performed in the early stages of the Winter War, so crude had been the steamroller tactics that finally gave Stalin his victory, and so stunning were the early conquests of the Nazis, that military experts the world over gave the Russians no chance at all in surviving the German onslaught. General Marshal advised Franklin Roosevelt, a few days after the German attack in June 1941, that the Red Army would be utterly defeated in no more than ninety days.<sup>15</sup>

The above quote is a partial truth in regards to the what the military experts predicted once the German *yon*slaught *yc*ame. The Soviets were completely out classed militarily by the Germans and suffered such staggering losses that it is hard to comprehend how the Russians were able to survive. Hitler came very close to destroying the Red Army at the gates of Moscow, where the last Soviet reserves were fighting a desperate struggle only 30 kilometers from the city. The German Army had sufficient supplies, ammunition, men, and tanks to sack Moscow, but Hitler made the most fatal decision by redirecting the Army Groups to the south in order to capture the rich oil fields of the Caucasus.<sup>16</sup> Later, Hitler addressed the Reichstag and confessed that he had underestimated the magnitude of the Soviet war potential. More precisely, Hitler underestimated the Soviet ability to raise millions of men against the German Army in the face of astronomical losses right up to the end of the war.

After the war, many German officers wrote about their experiences in Russia that produced a wealth of operational reports on the influence of terrain and weather on combat in

---

<sup>15</sup> William R. Trotter, *A Frozen Hell: The Russo-Finnish Winter War of 1939-40*, (New York: Algonquin Books, 1991), pp. 36-37; 263-65. The reason for the war was Soviet anxiety over a German springboard through Finland. To remove the threat and thereby create a *uffer zone*, the Soviets demanded the movement of the Russo-Finnish frontier to the west, the destruction of all existing fortifications on the Karelian Isthmus, and the exchange and lease of certain lands with the right to establish and garrison a military base.

<sup>16</sup> This information was derived from R.H.S. Stolfi, *Hitler's Panzers East: World War II Reinterpreted*, (Norman, OK: Oklahoma University Press, 1991), pp. 144-47, who argues that Hitler had nearly destroyed the Red Army and could have driven the Bolshevik government out of Moscow. The book is very enlightening and I would recommend it to anyone interested in the Russian Front in 1941.

Russia. European Russia, the western ramparts of the Soviet Union, is the area between central Europe and the Ural Mountains. It is the largest area in Europe with the most natural obstacles to protect only a fraction of the Soviet realm. Only the Pripjat River flows from west to east but its tributaries form a maze of swamps. Almost all the other rivers flow from north to south, so that an attacker is faced with one obstacle after another. Each becomes more formidable than the other, which includes the Dniester, the Bug, the Neman, and the Dvina. The watersheds of the Dnepr, the Don, and the Volga are barriers of extreme difficulty. The swamp lands that are part of the river systems form a double obstacle.

Northern European Russia, the swampy woodland north and northeast of the Valdai Hills is unsuitable for armored mobile warfare. Any offensive must then be conducted in central and Southern European Russia where the woodlands are less sparse or even non-existent. The Smolensk-Moscow Ridge, a low glacial moraine, is very important to the conduct of military operations in the western part of European Russia. Since an attack on Russia could only originate from the west, the Soviets were easily able to defend the western ramparts of Russia with a population that outnumbered Germany 2 to 1. Speaking in general terms, the German Army mustered 10 million men, part of whom were kept in France, Holland, Belgium, Greece, Yugoslavia, Norway, and Africa. The Soviets, on the other hand, raised an Army of roughly 20 million, of which most were used to defend against the Germans. General der Infanterie, Karl Allmendinger, wrote

A sober consideration of those factors should have revealed the impossibility of overrunning the great area of European Russia and its defenders in one fell swoop. A sustained, uninterrupted offensive had not even been possible in the campaign against France... In dealing with Russia, just a simple and rough estimate of logistical problems made it evident that merely the distance factor, not to speak of Soviet military resistance, would of necessity require protracted breathing spells. Limited as the number of German forces at hand was, they could gain control over the Russian spaces only if they succeeded in continuously carrying the fight to the enemy.<sup>17</sup>

It is not at all surprising that the obvious question would be asked, what if the Soviets fought a delaying action and withdrew into the depth of their country? So was Hitler's strategy faulty? Or for that matter the strategy of Napoleon? Hitler's reasoning was based on political and emotional grounds. He considered the Communist system to be doomed and that the first attack would shake the very foundation of the Communist structure and cause it to collapse. The planning for the campaign, therefore, never went beyond a line that ran from Leningrad to the west of Smolensk to the lower Dnepr region. The idea was then to launch mechanized raids into the depth of Russia to assist the population in destroying the remaining strongholds of the Communist

---

<sup>17</sup> General der Infanterie Karl Allmendinger and other unidentified German officers, *Terrain Factors in the Russian Campaign*, Foreign Military Studies # T-34, Department of the Army, (Washington, D.C.: GOP, 1950), pp. 4-7 .

regime. Actually, the operations that were conducted beyond that line were improvisations born on the spur of the moment with no clear or even limited objective.<sup>18</sup>

The terrain and weather did not stop the German Army, evident after having reached the Don River and the outskirts of Moscow and Leningrad. Therefore, it was not the decisive factor in the failure of the invasion. The inability to destroy the Soviet Army was a decisive factor, although it must be said that the Soviet Army prevailed over the Germans at the hands of the highest military and political leaders.<sup>19</sup> Sir Basil H. Liddell Hart argues that Hitler's strategy became faulty the minute he invaded Russia, whereby Hitler abandoned his successful strategy of 1939-41 that utilized an *indirect* and more political approach. Thus, invading Russia was a *direct* approach strategy that left Hitler no political alternatives. Compounding a strategy that was without options, Hitler and his field commanders never agreed on the direction of the war, the conduct of operations, or the pursuit of a strategic objective to end hostilities. While Hitler was focused on seizing natural resources and the city of Leningrad, his generals gravitated in capturing Moscow.<sup>20</sup>

As an alternative, Hitler should not have redirected his forces to the south and focused on the destruction of the Soviet forces before Moscow. As indicated, the Soviets were down to their last reserves and fighting for their lives. Had Moscow fallen, Soviet command and control would have ceased to function and the Bolshevik government forced to flee. Once Moscow would have been in German hands for the winter, organized resistance could never have amounted to much.

In conclusion, the German Army attacked Soviet Russia in 1941 with limited military goals that were diametric to the political goals. Despite the fact that Hitler and his generals did not agree on the operational method of conquering Soviet Russia, proof that the German strategy was based on sound judgment was shown in the spring of 1941 when the Germans were on the verge of defeating the Soviets before Moscow. By 3 July, the Soviets were on the brink of disaster. Generals Heinz Guderian and Hermann Hoth orchestrated the attack with such daring, speed, and energy, encircling and bagging countless Soviets in less than 30 days. The German attack that drove as deep as the Dnieper and Dvina rivers disrupted the Soviet forces to a

---

<sup>18</sup> Allemendiger, *Terrain Factors in Russia*, 8-9, and Manstein, *Lost Victories*, 175-76. The German blitzkrieg tactics of huge envelopments proved extremely effective during the early part of the invasion into Russia, but once the German Army had penetrated deep into enemy territory on a broad front, the supply problem became acute. In addition, the Soviets were easily able to concentrate their forces in certain areas along the front and break into the rear of the German lines. This caused a chain reaction all across the front as units had to respond from other areas to restore the situation. A perfect example that illustrates both conditions was in 1942 at Stalingrad, where Field Marshal von Paulus's 6th Army was surrounded and cut off. The relief attempts, conducted by units committed elsewhere on the front, ultimately failed to save Paulus who was unable to breakout of Stalingrad as a result of fuel shortages. The resupply by air failed as a result of bad weather. The relief force created vacuums elsewhere which the Soviets exploited quickly.

<sup>19</sup> Allemendiger, *Terrain Factors in Russia*, 59-60.

<sup>20</sup> Basil H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 2nd revised ed., (New York: Meridian, 1991), pp. 238-47; Stolfi, *Hitler's Panzers East*, 80-82, and Manstein, *Lost Victories*, 176-77..

point where Soviet war production and mobilization was completely paralyzed. By 3 July 1941, the conventional wisdom that the inexhaustible Soviet manpower reserves and enormous productive capabilities had mobilized, was non-existent.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup>

Stolfi, *Hitler's Panzers East*, 115-17.

## Bibliography

- Allmendinger, Karl and other unidentified German officers. *Terrain Factors in the Russian Campaign*. Washington, D.C.: GOP, 1950.
- Clausewitz, Carl von. *On War*. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, ed., Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989.
- De Jonge, Alex. *Stalin: And the Shaping of the Soviet Union*. New York: Quill, 1986.
- Hart, B. H. Lidell. *Strategy*. New York: Meridian, 1991.
- Hartley, Janet M. *Alexander I*. New York: Longman Group, 1994.
- Hillgruber, Andreas. *Germany and the Two World Wars*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981.
- Kinder, Hermann and Werner Hilgemann. *The Atlas of World History: From the French Revolution to the American Revolution*. New York: Doubleday, 1966.
- Kissinger, Henry. *Diplomacy*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994.
- Manstein, Field Marshal Erich von. *Lost Victories*. Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1994.
- Seward, Desmond. *Napoleon and Hitler: A Comparative Biography*. New York: Penguin, 1988.
- Schmitt, Bernadotte E. and Harold C. Vedeler. *The World in the Crucible*. New York: Harper and Row, 1984.
- Stolfi, R. H. S. *Hitler's Panzers East: World War II Reinterpreted*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.
- Trotter, William R. *A Frozen Hell: The Russo-Finnish Winter War 1939-40*. New York: Algonquin Books, 1991.