

EUROPE AT WAR - 1941

Operation Barbarossa, June-September

Hitler never disguised from his generals the fact that he regarded the Nazi-Soviet Pact as a temporary rather than a permanent feature of Germany's strategic structure. He told them "we can only oppose Russia when we are free in the West". Shortly after 03.00 on June 22 three Army Groups, North, Centre and South covering the whole German front from the Carpathians to the Baltic moved forward after a short artillery bombardment while air squadrons flew deep into Russia. The Russian preparation for invasion was astonishing given that the German preparations can hardly have escaped their attention. The Luftwaffe immediately established air superiority over the Russian air force which was vital for the success of the offensive.

The Russians tended to fight in separate, uncoordinated groups, without unified leadership; obstinate resistance alternated with panic and withdrawal. Again and again elements of the Red Army succeeded in breaking out to the east where gaps in the German net being drawn around them were widest. Nevertheless the Germans strove to encircle and eliminate great pockets of Russian troops but often were not able to create a solid ring around the encircled pockets. However, by June 28 all the preliminary objectives had been attained. On July 9 Army Group Centre

reported that they had destroyed 22 infantry divisions, three cavalry divisions, 7 armoured divisions and taken 300,000 prisoners. In addition they had captured 2,500 tanks, 1,400 guns, and 250 aircraft.

Despite pleas from his Generals to maintain the Army Group Centre's drive towards Moscow, Hitler now decreed that the main focus should be on the wheat lands and industries of the Ukraine rather than the capture of the Soviet capital. As late as July 29 there was disagreement between Hitler and his army commanders as to whether the main objective should be Leningrad in the north, Moscow in the centre, or Kiev in the south. For his part Hitler was showing a lack of interest in Moscow. Days elapsed while no final decisions were made and by this time the Russians were already learning from their earlier mistakes. More importantly delaying actions were being fought to gain time for the removal and relocation further east of factories and industrial equipment needed for the war effort. The Red Army was painfully aware of the contribution already being made to the German war effort by the enslaved western European countries and its leaders were determined that there should be no such benefit from captured Soviet industry. Whatever could be moved to Siberia or the Urals was moved.

Hitler meanwhile was having difficulties with his generals – particularly those of Army Group Centre, on whom Moscow

continued to exert a fatal attraction. Disquiet was also beginning permeate the generals about the continued resistance of the Red Army and the troops themselves in their letters home showed that they were becoming uneasy when faced with endless plains and no matter how many Russians they killed or captured, the next day they found the Red Army still in business. As the focus moved away from the drive to Moscow so attention was drawn towards Kiev in the south and Leningrad in the north. By late August Army Group North had reached a point only 50 miles from the outskirts of Leningrad and in early September Army Group South was closing in around Kiev. Because of the difficult terrain south of Leningrad and increasing Russian resistance progress was slow, however by September 17 the encirclement of the city was complete. Also at this time Hitler made it clear to his dissenting generals that the main thrust must be to the south and to this end he diverted Army Group Centre away from Moscow and ordered it to join Army Group South in the final drive to Kiev.

The entire southwestern front was by now in serious danger of encirclement and the Soviet Military council formally requested Stalin's permission to withdraw all their forces 150 miles to the east but this was categorically rejected. Instead Stalin sacked the regional commander and appointed a former peoples Commissar Marshall Timoshenko who was one of the older generation of Soviet soldiers. While Stalin continued to vacillate the net around Kiev was tightening.

Some small groups were able to break out but eventually over 500,000 were either killed or imprisoned; more than two thirds of the strength of the southwestern front. It was the biggest catastrophe in Russian history. By the end of September the great battle for the Ukraine was over and the remnants of four Soviet armies dragged themselves eastwards out of the reach of German encirclement. For their part the Germans were extremely overstretched and by the time that the resumption of the attack on Moscow began their troops were worn down by many months of hard fighting. Their morale was still high but the autumn rains were already beginning to hinder their progress as much as the enemy opposing them.