

Initial Success of the German Invasion of Russia

By Walter S. Zapotoczny

By all accounts, the German invasion of the Soviet Union June 22, 1941 was a major success as the Russians were completely surprised and many of the Soviet Forces were crushed in the initial attacks. Sixteen hours after the opening of Operation Barbarossa, the German Army in the east had virtually unhinged two Soviet Fronts, the Northwestern, and the Western. At their junction, the Soviet 11th Army had been battered to pieces. The left flank of the Russian 8th Army and the right flank of the 3rd Army had been similarly devastated. North of the Kaunas, German armor was over the river Dubissa and south of the city, German tanks were astride the Nieman. On the left flank of the Western Front of the Soviet 4th Army was in no position to offer an effective defense. The Russian Front commanders struggled desperately to maintain the cohesion of their forces. The German operations in the south were dazzlingly successful. All of the objectives Hitler had outlined were achieved. The Pripet Marshes were cleared; the Dnieper bend was occupied; the Donetz basin; and the industrial complex of the Ukraine were denied to the enemy, through either dispersal or seizure. Above all, the mass of the Red Army in the south was battered to pieces in a battle that cost the Russians a million casualties.

The Soviet Union went to war without a commander-in-chief; the post had been abolished seventeen years before during the military reforms of the 1920s and never revived. On the second day of the war, the Soviet government and the Central Committee hurriedly authorized the establishment of an improvised high command. The rapid breakdown in communications between the Front and its formations and between the Front command and the high command occurred. The evening situation reports presented by the General Staff for the information of the heads of arms and services scarcely corresponded in these early days to the map deployments at the front. The high command discussions ground to an operational-administrative bog; while trying to formulate strategic-operational assignments, Stalin and his officers busied themselves with minutiae, which devoured valuable time. They discussed the type of rifle to be issued to the infantry units, or whether bayonets were needed, and if so, should they be triple-edged? Stalin appeared to have no grasp of the scale of operations and the vastness of the war into which he had been hurled. On June 25, the Russians organized four armies of their reserve to take up defensive positions to block the Germans advance. The speed of the German progress, however, and the disasters, which unfolded on the flanks, north and southwest, ruined these plans and embroiled the Red Army in a catastrophe, tearing out huge chunks of fronts and severing military, economic, and political centers from the central government control. It appeared as though the Soviet military was about to collapse.

At the end of September 1941, as the Germans had secured Kiev and were taking account of the Russian losses. The Germans estimated Russian losses of two and a half million men, 22,000 guns, 18,000 tanks, and 14,000 aircraft. It appeared, by all estimates, that the Red Army was dead. The strategic objectives, which the German Army had begun, were largely fulfilled. Leningrad had been isolated and neutralized. The Ukraine had been opened to the German economy as far as the Donetz River. Work had already begun on a draft occupation and planning study, which forecast the withdrawal to Germany of about eighty divisions. The victory

at Kiev had encouraged many of the German Staff to believe that one more encirclement battle would finish the Russians off, and the Germans would winter in Moscow.

By October 14 the hinge of the Russian front cracked. German tanks broke through and rolled down the headwaters of the Volga River toward Moscow. The news that government offices were being transferred prompted a mass flight by all those who were capable of movement. Stalin himself remained in the city. On October 19, Moscow was declared to be under a state siege, and special reinforcements of security forces were brought in to restore order. From that time the momentary flickers of panic died away. The Germans were closest to Moscow in the north and center. At Mozhaisk, they could see anti-aircraft fire over Moscow on a clear night. The real danger to the Red Army was farther south, where the country was more open and where, almost without tanks General Zhukov was faced by the whole of the 2nd Panzer Army. At this stage of the battle, Zhukov had the only independent tank force left. It was equipped with the new T-34 tank. They were able to inflict casualties and stop the German 4th Panzer Group advancing Tula, south of Moscow. The German Army had enjoyed tank superiority up to this point. From this point on the situation was reversed. The plight of the German soldier was one of trudging through the mud and freezing temperatures at night. The advance to Moscow was slow. During the last three weeks in October, weather conditions, which included, heavy rain, snow showers, damp and penetrating mist, made movement almost impossible on two days out of three. There were over 100,000 cases of frostbite with over 14,357 requiring amputation. The Russian withdrew into Moscow. Zhukov had fixed the bounds, which were to be defended until the last, and until these were reached, he did not intend to risk any more encirclement. By the end of October, the two armies had fought each other to a standstill. The transfer of troops from the Far East had begun in the first days of November, and by the time the German push on Moscow began on November 15; the Russians had doubled their strength. During the night of December 4 - 5 the whole of the northwestern front went over to the offensive, by the December 6, German Army Group Center was under violent pressure along its entire length, and Moscow was never again threatened.

In February 1942, the Russian offensive petered out. Both sides tried to interpret each other's intentions. A number of German Generals declared that a resumption of the offensive in 1942 was impossible, and that it was wiser to make sure of holding what they had gained. Hitler's idea was to smash the Russians finally by breaking the power of their army in the south, capturing the seat of their economy, and taking the option of either wheeling up behind Moscow or down top the oil fields of Baku. In April, a more ambitious scheme was worked out. This involved the seizure of Stalingrad, and the isthmus between the Don River and the Volga River. For Hitler, Stalingrad was to be the first step. His intention was to wheel north, along the line of the Volga River, and to cut communications of the Russians armies defending Moscow while sending scouting groups still farther east, toward the Ural Mountains.

Contrary to German expectations, Stalingrad did not fall into their hands rapidly nor did the Soviet armies fall back entirely to the eastern bank of the Volga River. The attempt to storm into the center of the city and onto the Volga itself was being held. Each building inn Stalingrad became its own battleground, with fortresses fashioned out of factories; railway stations, separate streets or small squares and finally single walls. Throughout August and well into

September German success flowed one after another, but none brought the attainment of the major objective. To the north of the Soviet-German front the offensive in the Leningrad area had died away. Repeated attacks by the Germans meet stiff resistance by the Red Army. During the first week in November, Soviet units began moving into their start positions for an offensive on three fronts.

No German soldier who fought on the Russian Front could forget the many seasons and faces of war. The most elemental of natural conditions; rain, mud, cold, snow, heat, and dust formed a recurring theme of the entire war for many soldiers. Many slept day and night in the same uniform, on a plank bed, wrapped in a wool blanket. In the rainy season, the mud is so thick that it is a chore just to move. In winter the bitter cold and snow slows everything down. No soldier could escape the unpleasant business of living rough, of coping with a harsh environment under conditions of extreme physical and mental exhaustion. For many, the real enemy was the weather, the effects of living in the open, and the stresses and strains endemic to a group forced into proximity with an often-unfamiliar natural environment.

Throughout long hours of boredom and loneliness, deprivation and hardship, horror and agony, the German soldier soon became familiar with many of the myriad faces of war. Fear was the real enemy of most soldiers; the fear of death or of cowardice, fear of the conflict within the spirit or, a simple fear of showing fear. Moreover, this fear could surface at any time. Additionally, the stark realization that his comrade lay dead or wounded forced many soldiers to confront his doubt and fear.

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