

= Operation Barbarossa =

Operation Barbarossa (German : Unternehmen Barbarossa) was the code name for Nazi Germany 's World War II invasion of the Soviet Union , which began on 22 June 1941 . The operation was driven by Adolf Hitler 's ideological desire to conquer Soviet territory as outlined in his 1925 manifesto Mein Kampf (" My Struggle ") .

In the two years leading up to the invasion , the two countries signed political and economic pacts for strategic purposes . Nevertheless , on 18 December 1940 , Hitler authorized an invasion of the Soviet Union , with a planned start date of 15 May 1941 . The actual invasion began on 22 June 1941 . Over the course of the operation , about four million soldiers of the Axis powers invaded the Soviet Union along a 2 @, @ 900 @-@ kilometer (1 @, @ 800 mi) front , the largest invasion force in the history of warfare . In addition to troops , the Germans employed some 600 @, @ 000 motor vehicles and between 600 @, @ 000 and 700 @, @ 000 horses . It marked the beginning of the rapid escalation of the war , both geographically and in the formation of the Allied coalition .

Operationally , the Germans won resounding victories and occupied some of the most important economic areas of the Soviet Union , mainly in Ukraine , both inflicting and sustaining heavy casualties . Despite their successes , the German offensive stalled on the outskirts of Moscow and was subsequently pushed back by a Soviet counteroffensive . The Red Army repelled the Wehrmacht 's strongest blows and forced Germany into a war of attrition for which it was unprepared . The Germans would never again mount a simultaneous offensive along the entire strategic Soviet @-@ Axis front . The failure of the operation drove Hitler to demand further operations inside the USSR of increasingly limited scope , all of which eventually failed , such as Case Blue and Operation Citadel .

The failure of Operation Barbarossa was a turning point in the fortunes of the Third Reich . Most importantly , the operation opened up the Eastern Front , to which more forces were committed than in any other theater of war in world history . The Eastern Front became the site of some of the largest battles , most horrific atrocities , and highest casualties for Soviets and Germans alike , all of which influenced the course of both World War II and the subsequent history of the 20th century . The German forces captured millions of Soviet prisoners who were not granted protections stipulated in the Geneva Conventions . Most of them never returned alive ; Germany deliberately starved the prisoners to death as part of a " Hunger Plan " that aimed to reduce the population of Eastern Europe and then re @-@ populate it with ethnic Germans . Over a million Soviet Jews were murdered by Einsatzgruppen death squads and gassing as part of the Holocaust .

= = Background = =

= = = Racial policies of Nazi Germany = = =

As early as 1925 , Adolf Hitler vaguely declared in his political manifesto and autobiography Mein Kampf that he would invade the Soviet Union , asserting that the German people needed to secure Lebensraum (" living space ") to ensure the survival of Germany for generations to come . On 10 February 1939 , Hitler told his army commanders that the next war would be " purely a war of Weltanschauungen ... totally a people 's war , a racial war . " On 23 November , once World War II had already started , Hitler declared that " racial war has broken out and this war shall determine who shall govern Europe , and with it , the world . " Racial policy of Nazi Germany viewed the Soviet Union (and all of Eastern Europe) as populated by non @-@ Aryan Untermenschen (" sub @-@ humans ") , ruled by " Jewish Bolshevik conspirators " . Hitler claimed in Mein Kampf that Germany 's destiny was to " turn to the East " as it did " six hundred years ago " . Accordingly , it was stated Nazi policy to kill , deport , or enslave the majority of Russian and other Slavic populations and repopulate the land with Germanic peoples , under the Generalplan Ost . The Germans ' belief in their ethnic superiority is discernible in official German records and by pseudoscientific articles in German periodicals at the time , which covered topics such as " how to deal with alien populations "

While older historiography tended to emphasize the notion of a "clean" Wehrmacht, the historian Jürgen Förster notes that "In fact, the military commanders were caught up in the ideological character of the conflict, and involved in its implementation as willing participants." Before and during the invasion of the Soviet Union, German troops were heavily indoctrinated with anti-Bolshevik, anti-Semitic and anti-Slavic ideology via movies, radio, lectures, books and leaflets. Likening the Soviets to the forces of Genghis Khan, Hitler told Croatian military leader Slavko Kvaternik that the "Mongolian race" threatened Europe. Following the invasion, Wehrmacht officers told their soldiers to target people who were described as "Jewish Bolshevik subhumans", the "Mongol hordes", the "Asiatic flood" and the "Red beast". Nazi propaganda portrayed the war against the Soviet Union as both an ideological war between German National Socialism and Jewish Bolshevism and a racial war between the Germans and the Jewish, Gypsies and Slavic Untermenschen. German army commanders cast the Jews as the major cause behind the "partisan struggle". The main guideline policy for German troops was "Where there's a partisan, there's a Jew, and where there's a Jew, there's a partisan," or "The partisan is where the Jew is." Many German troops viewed the war in Nazi terms and regarded their Soviet enemies as sub-human.

After the war began, the Nazis issued a ban on sexual relations between Germans and foreign slave workers. There were regulations enacted against the Ost-*Arbeiter* ("Eastern Workers") that included the death penalty for sexual relations with a German person. Heinrich Himmler, in his secret memorandum, *Reflections on the Treatment of Peoples of Alien Races in the East*, (dated 25 May 1940) outlined the future plans for the non-German populations in the East. Himmler believed the Germanization process in Eastern Europe would be complete when "in the East dwell only men with truly German, Germanic blood".

The Nazi secret plan *Generalplan Ost* ("General Plan for the East"), which was prepared in 1941 and confirmed in 1942, called for a "new order of ethnographical relations" in the territories occupied by Nazi Germany in Eastern Europe. The plan envisaged ethnic cleansing, executions and enslavement of the overwhelming majority of the populations of conquered countries with very small differing percentages of the various conquered nations undergoing Germanization, expulsion into the depths of Russia and other fates. The net effect of this plan would be to ensure that the conquered territories would be Germanized. It was divided into two parts: the *Kleine Planung* ("Small Plan"), which covered actions to be taken during the war, and the *Große Planung* ("Large Plan"), which covered actions to be undertaken after the war was won, and to be implemented gradually over a period of 25 to 30 years.

Evidence from a speech given by General Erich Hoepner indicates the disposition of Operation Barbarossa and the Nazi racial plan, as he informed the 4th Panzer Group that the war against the Soviet Union was "an essential part of the German people's struggle for existence" (*Daseinkampf*), also referring to the imminent battle as the "old struggle of Germans against Slavs" and even stated, "the struggle must aim at the annihilation of today's Russia and must therefore be waged with unparalleled harshness." To Hoepner, the imminent conflict would be "the old battle of the Germanic against the Slav peoples ... the defense of European culture against Moscovite Asiatic inundation, and the repulse of Jewish Bolshevism ... No adherents of the present Russian Bolshevik system are to be spared." Walther von Brauchitsch also told his subordinates that troops should view the war as a "struggle between two different races and [should] act with the necessary severity." Racial motivations were central to Nazi ideology and played a key role in planning for Operation Barbarossa since both Jews and communists were considered equivalent enemies of the Nazi state. Nazi imperialist ambitions were exercised without moral consideration for either group in their ultimate struggle for *Lebensraum*. In the eyes of the Nazis, the war against the Soviet Union would be a *Vernichtungskrieg*, a war of annihilation.

=== German-Soviet relations of 1939 ? 40 ===

In August 1939, Germany and the Soviet Union signed a non-aggression pact in Moscow

known as the Molotov - Ribbentrop Pact shortly before the German invasion of Poland that triggered the outbreak of World War II in Europe . A secret protocol to the pact outlined an agreement between Germany and the Soviet Union on the division of the eastern European border states between their respective " spheres of influence " : the Soviet Union and Germany would partition Poland in the event of an invasion by Germany , and the Soviets would be allowed to overrun the Baltic states and Finland . On 23 August 1939 the rest of the world learned of the pact between the Nazis and the Soviets but were unaware of the provisions to partition Poland . The conclusion of this pact was indeed followed by a Soviet invasion of Poland that led to the annexation of the eastern part of the country . The pact stunned the world because of the parties ' earlier mutual hostility and their conflicting ideologies . As a result of the pact , Germany and the Soviet Union maintained reasonably strong diplomatic relations for two years and fostered an important economic relationship . The countries entered a trade pact in 1940 by which the Soviets received German military equipment and trade goods in exchange for raw materials , such as oil and wheat , to help the Nazis circumvent a British blockade of Germany .

Despite the parties ' ostensibly cordial relations , each side was highly suspicious of the other 's intentions . After Germany entered the Axis Pact with Japan and Italy , it began negotiations about a potential Soviet entry into the pact . After two days of negotiations in Berlin from 12 to 14 November 1940 , Germany presented a written proposal for a Soviet entry into the Axis . On 25 November 1940 , the Soviet Union offered a written counter @-@ proposal to join the Axis if Germany would agree to refrain from interference in the Soviet Union 's sphere of influence , but Germany did not respond . As both sides began colliding with each other in Eastern Europe , conflict appeared more likely , although they did sign a border and commercial agreement addressing several open issues in January 1941 . Historian Robert Service avows that Soviet leader Joseph Stalin was convinced that the overall military strength of the USSR was such that he had nothing to fear and anticipated an easy victory should Germany attack ; moreover , Stalin believed that since the Germans were still fighting the British in the west , Hitler would be unlikely to open up a two front war and subsequently delayed the reconstruction of defensive fortifications in the border regions . When German soldiers swam across the Bug River to warn the Red Army of an impending attack , they were treated like enemy agents and shot . Some historians believe that Stalin , despite providing an amicable front to Hitler , did not wish to remain allies with Germany . Rather , Stalin might have had intentions to break off from Germany and proceed with his own campaign against Germany to be followed by one against the rest of Europe .

== German invasion plans ==

Stalin 's reputation as a brutal dictator contributed both to the Nazis ' justification of their assault and their faith in success ; many competent and experienced military officers were killed in the Great Purge of the 1930s , leaving the Red Army with a relatively inexperienced leadership compared to that of their German counterparts . The Nazis often emphasized the Soviet regime 's brutality when targeting the Slavs with propaganda . They also claimed that the Red Army was preparing to attack the Germans , and their own invasion was thus presented as a pre @-@ emptive strike .

In the middle of 1940 , following the rising tension between the Soviet Union and Germany over territories in the Balkans , an eventual invasion of the Soviet Union seemed to Hitler to be the only solution . While no concrete plans were made yet , Hitler told one of his generals in June that the victories in Western Europe finally freed his hands for his important real task : the showdown with Bolshevism . With the successful end to the campaign in France , General Erich Marcks was assigned to the working group drawing up the initial invasion plans of the Soviet Union . The first battle plans were entitled Operation Draft East (but colloquially it was known as the Marcks Plan) . His report advocated the A @-@ A line to be the operational objective of any invasion of the Soviet Union . This goal would extend from northern city of Arkhangelsk on the Arctic Sea through Gorky and Rostov to the port city of Astrakhan at the mouth of the Volga on the Caspian Sea . The report concluded that this military border would reduce the threat to Germany (and the Third Reich) from attacks by enemy bombers .

Although Hitler was warned by his general staff that occupying " Western Russia " would create " more of a drain than a relief for Germany 's economic situation " , he anticipated compensatory benefits , such as the demobilization of entire divisions to relieve the acute labor shortage in German industry ; the exploitation of Ukraine as a reliable and immense source of agricultural products ; the use of forced labor to stimulate Germany 's overall economy ; and the expansion of territory to improve Germany 's efforts to isolate Great Britain . Hitler was convinced that Britain would sue for peace once the Germans triumphed in the Soviet Union .

On 5 December 1940 , Hitler received the final military plans for the invasion on which the German High Command had been working since July 1940 under the codename " Operation Otto " . Hitler , however , was dissatisfied with these plans and on 18 December issued Führer Directive 21 , which called for a new battle plan , now codenamed " Operation Barbarossa " . The operation was named after medieval Emperor Frederick Barbarossa of the Holy Roman Empire , a leader of the Third Crusade in the 12th century . The invasion was set for 15 May 1941 , though it was delayed for about 7 weeks in favor of further time for preparation because of the war in the Balkans .

According to a 1978 essay by German historian Andreas Hillgruber , the invasion plans drawn up by the German military elite were coloured by hubris stemming from the rapid defeat of France at the hands of the " invincible " Wehrmacht and by ignorance tempered by traditional German stereotypes of Russia as a primitive , backward " Asiatic " country . Red Army soldiers were considered brave and tough , but the officer corps was held in contempt . The leadership of the Wehrmacht paid little attention to politics , culture and the considerable industrial capacity of the Soviet Union , in favour of a very narrow military view . Hillgruber argued that because these assumptions were shared by the entire military elite , Hitler was able to push through with a " war of annihilation " that would be waged in the most inhumane fashion possible with the complicity of " several military leaders " , even though it was quite clear that this would be in violation of all accepted norms of warfare .

In autumn 1940 , high @-@ ranking German officials drafted a memorandum on the dangers of an invasion of the Soviet Union . They said Ukraine , Belorussia and the Baltic States would end up as only a further economic burden for Germany . It was argued that the Soviets in their current bureaucratic form were harmless and that the occupation would not benefit Germany . Hitler disagreed with economists about the risks and told his right @-@ hand man Hermann Göring , the chief of the Luftwaffe , that he would no longer listen to misgivings about the economic dangers of a war with Russia . It is speculated that this was passed on to General Georg Thomas , who had produced reports that predicted a net economic drain for Germany in the event of an invasion of the Soviet Union unless its economy was captured intact and the Caucasus oilfields seized in the first blow , and he consequently revised his future report to fit Hitler 's wishes . The Red Army 's ineptitude in the Winter War against Finland in 1939 ? 40 convinced Hitler of a quick victory within a few months . He did not anticipate a long campaign lasting into the winter , and therefore adequate preparations , such as the distribution of warm clothing and winterization of vehicles and lubricants , were not made .

Beginning in March 1941 , Göring 's Green Folder laid out details for the disposal of the Soviet economy after conquest . The Hunger Plan outlined how the entire urban population of conquered territories was to be starved to death , thus creating an agricultural surplus to feed Germany and urban space for the German upper class . Nazi policy aimed to destroy the Soviet Union as a political entity in accordance with the geopolitical Lebensraum ideals for the benefit of future generations of the " Nordic master race " . In 1941 , Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg , later appointed Reich Minister of the Occupied Eastern Territories , suggested that conquered Soviet territory should be administered in the following Reichskommissariate (" Reich Commissionerships ") :

German military planners also researched Napoleon 's failed invasion of Russia . In their calculations , they concluded that there was little danger of a large @-@ scale retreat of the Red Army into the Russian interior , as it could not afford to give up the Baltic states , Ukraine , or the Moscow and Leningrad regions , all of which were vital to the Red Army for supply reasons and would thus have to be defended . Hitler and his generals disagreed on where Germany should focus

its energy . Hitler , in many discussions with his generals , repeated his order of " Leningrad first , the Donbass second , Moscow third " ; but he consistently emphasized the destruction of the Red Army over the achievement of specific terrain objectives . Hitler believed Moscow to be of " no great importance " in the defeat of the Soviet Union and instead believed victory would come with the destruction of the Red Army west of the capital , especially west of the Western Dvina and Dnieper rivers , and this pervaded the plan for Barbarossa . This belief later led to disputes between Hitler and several German senior officers , including Heinz Guderian , Gerhard Engel , Fedor von Bock and Franz Halder , who believed the decisive victory could only be delivered at Moscow . Hitler had grown overconfident in his own military judgment as a result of the rapid successes in Western Europe .

= = German preparations = =

The Germans had begun massing troops near the Soviet border even before the campaign in the Balkans had finished . By the third week of February 1941 , 680 @, @ 000 German soldiers were gathered in assembly areas on the Romanian @-@ Soviet border . In preparation for the attack , Hitler moved more than 3 @. @ 2 million German and about 500 @, @ 000 Axis soldiers to the Soviet border , launched many aerial surveillance missions over Soviet territory , and stockpiled war materiel in the East .

Although the Soviet High Command was alarmed by this , Stalin 's belief that the Third Reich was unlikely to attack only two years after signing the Molotov ? Ribbentrop Pact resulted in a slow Soviet preparation . Since April 1941 , the Germans had begun setting up Operation Haifisch to substantiate their claims that Britain was the real target . These simulated preparations in Norway and the English Channel coast included activities such as ship concentrations , reconnaissance flights and training exercises .

The postponement of Barbarossa from the initially planned date of 15 May to the actual invasion date of 22 June 1941 (a 38 @-@ day delay) occurred for a number of reasons . Most importantly , the Balkans Campaign required a diversion of troops and resources that hampered preparations , and an unusually wet winter kept rivers at full flood until late spring . The full floods could have discouraged an earlier attack , even if it was unlikely to have happened before the end of the Balkans Campaign .

The importance of the delay is still debated . William Shirer argued that Hitler 's Balkans Campaign had delayed the commencement of Barbarossa by several weeks and thereby jeopardized it . He cited the deputy chief of the German General Staff in 1941 Friedrich Paulus , who claimed the campaign resulted in a delay of " about five weeks . " This figure is corroborated by both the German Naval War Diary and Gerd von Rundstedt . Antony Beevor names a variety of factors that delayed Barbarossa , including the delay in distributing motor transport , problems with fuel distribution , and the difficulty in establishing forward airfields for the Luftwaffe .

The Germans deployed one independent regiment , one separate motorized training brigade and 153 divisions for Barbarossa , which included 104 infantry , 19 panzer and 15 motorized infantry divisions in three army groups , nine security divisions to operate in conquered territories , four divisions in Finland and two divisions as reserve under the direct control of OKH . These were equipped with about 3 @, @ 350 tanks , 7 @, @ 200 artillery pieces , 2 @, @ 770 aircraft (that amounted to 65 percent of the Luftwaffe) , about 600 @, @ 000 motor vehicles and 625 @, @ 000 ? 700 @, @ 000 horses . Finland slated 14 divisions for the invasion , and Romania offered 13 divisions and eight brigades over the course of Barbarossa . The entire Axis forces , 3 @. @ 8 million personnel , deployed across a front extending from the Arctic Ocean southward to the Black Sea , were all controlled by the OKH and organized into Army Norway , Army Group North , Army Group Center and Army Group South , alongside three luftflotten (air fleets , the air force equivalent of army groups) that supported the army groups : Luftflotte 1 for North , Luftflotte 2 for Center and Luftflotte 4 for South .

Army Norway was to operate in far northern Scandinavia and bordering Soviet territories . Army Group North was to march through the Baltic states into northern Russia , either take or destroy the

city of Leningrad and link up with Finnish forces . Army Group Center , the army group equipped with the most armour and air power , was to strike from Poland into Belorussia and the west @-@ central regions of Russia proper , and advance to Smolensk and then Moscow . Army Group South was to strike the heavily populated and agricultural heartland of Ukraine , taking Kiev before continuing eastward over the steppes of southern USSR to the Volga with the aim of controlling the oil @-@ rich Caucasus . Army Group South was deployed in two sections separated by a 198 @-@ mile (319 km) gap . The northern section , which contained the army group 's only panzer group , was in southern Poland right next to Army Group Center , and the southern section was in Romania .

The German forces in the rear (mostly Waffen @-@ SS and Einsatzgruppen units) were to operate in conquered territories to counter any partisan activity in areas they controlled , as well as to execute captured Soviet political commissars and Jews . On 17 June , Reich Main Security Office (RSHA) chief Reinhard Heydrich briefed around thirty to fifty Einsatzgruppen commanders on " the policy of eliminating Jews in Soviet territories , at least in general terms . " While the Einsatzgruppen were assigned to the Wehrmacht 's units , which provided them with supplies such as gasoline and food , they were controlled by the RSHA . The official plan for Barbarossa assumed that the army groups would be able to advance freely to their primary objectives simultaneously , without spreading thin , once they had won the border battles and destroyed the Red Army 's forces in the border area .

= = Soviet preparations = =

In 1930 , Mikhail Tukhachevsky , a prominent military theorist in tank warfare in the interwar period and later Marshal of the Soviet Union , forwarded a memo to the Kremlin that lobbied for colossal investment in the resources required for the mass production of weapons , pressing the case for " 40 @,@ 000 aircraft and 50 @,@ 000 tanks " . In the early 1930s , a very modern operational doctrine for the Red Army was developed and promulgated in the 1936 Field Regulations in the form of the Deep Battle Concept . Defense expenditure also grew rapidly from just 12 percent of the gross national product in 1933 to 18 percent by 1940 .

However , during Stalin 's Great Purge in the late 1930s , which was still partially ongoing at the start of the war in June 1941 , the officer corps of the Red Army was decimated and their replacements , appointed by Stalin for political reasons , often lacked military competence . Of the five Marshals of the Soviet Union appointed in 1935 , only two survived Stalin 's purge . 15 out of 16 army commanders , 50 out of the 57 corps commanders , 154 out of the 186 divisional commanders and 401 out of 456 colonels were killed , and many other officers were dismissed . In total , about 30 @,@ 000 Red Army personnel were executed . Stalin further underscored his control by reasserting the role of political commissars at the divisional level and below to oversee the political loyalty of the Army to the regime . The commissars held a position equal to that of the commander of the unit they were overseeing . But in spite of efforts to ensure the political subservience of the armed forces , in the wake of Red Army 's poor performance in Poland and in the Winter War , about 80 percent of the officers dismissed during the Great Purge were reinstated by 1941 . Also , between January 1939 and May 1941 , 161 new divisions were activated . Although about 75 percent of all the officers had been in their position for less than one year at the start of the German invasion of 1941 , many of the short tenures can be attributed not only to the purge , but also to the rapid increase in creation of military units .

In the Soviet Union , speaking to his generals in December 1940 , Stalin mentioned Hitler 's references to an attack on the Soviet Union in Mein Kampf and Hitler 's belief that the Red Army would need four years to ready itself . Stalin declared " we must be ready much earlier " and " we will try to delay the war for another two years " . As early as August 1940 , British intelligence had received hints of German plans to attack the Soviets only a week after Hitler informally approved the plans for Barbarossa and warned the Soviet Union accordingly . But Stalin 's distrust of the British led him to ignore their warnings in the belief that they were a trick designed to bring the Soviet Union into the war on their side . He had an ill @-@ founded confidence in the Molotov ? Ribbentrop Pact

and suspected the British of trying to spread false rumours in order to trigger a war between Germany and the USSR . In early 1941 , Stalin 's own intelligence services and American intelligence gave regular and repeated warnings of an impending German attack . Soviet spy Richard Sorge also gave Stalin the exact German launch date , but Sorge and other informers had previously given different invasion dates that passed peacefully before the actual invasion . Stalin acknowledged the possibility of an attack in general and therefore made significant preparations , but decided not to run the risk of provoking Hitler .

Beginning in July 1940 , the Red Army General Staff developed war plans that identified the Wehrmacht as the most dangerous threat to the Soviet Union , and that in the case of a war with Germany , the Wehrmacht 's main attack would come through the region north of the Pripyat Marshes into Belorussia ; which later proved to be correct . But Stalin disagreed , and in October he authorized the development of new plans that assumed a German attack would focus on the region south of Pripyat Marshes towards the economically vital regions in Ukraine . This became the basis for all subsequent Soviet war plans and the deployment of their armed forces in preparation for the German invasion .

In early 1941 Stalin authorized the State Defense Plan 1941 (DP @-@ 41) , which along with the Mobilization Plan 1941 (MP @-@ 41) , called for the deployment of 186 divisions , as the first strategic echelon , in the four military districts of the western Soviet Union that faced the Axis territories ; and the deployment of another 51 divisions along the Dvina and Dnieper rivers as the second strategic echelon under Stavka control , which in the case of a German invasion was tasked to spearhead a Soviet counteroffensive along with the remaining forces of the first echelon . But on 22 June 1941 the first echelon only contained 171 divisions , numbering 2 @. @ 6 ? 2 @. @ 9 million ; and the second strategic echelon contained 57 divisions that were still mobilizing , most of which were still seriously understrength . The second echelon was undetected by German intelligence until days after the invasion commenced , in most cases only when the German ground forces bumped into them .

At the start of the invasion , the manpower of the Soviet military force that had been mobilized was 5 @. @ 3 ? 5 @. @ 5 million , and it was still increasing as the Soviet reserve force of 14 million , with at least basic military training , continued to mobilize . The Red Army was dispersed and still preparing when the invasion commenced . Their units were often separated and lacked adequate transportation .

The Soviet Union had some 23 @, @ 000 tanks in service , of which about 11 @, @ 000 were in the western military districts that faced the German invasion force . Hitler later declared to some of his generals , " If I had known about the Russian tank strength in 1941 I would not have attacked " . However , maintenance and readiness standards were very poor ; ammunition and radios were in short supply , and many armoured units lacked the trucks for supplies . The most advanced Soviet tank models ? the KV @-@ 1 and T @-@ 34 ? which were superior to all current German tanks , as well as all designs still in development as of the summer 1941 , were not available in large numbers at the time the invasion commenced . Furthermore , in the autumn of 1939 , the Soviets disbanded their mechanized corps and partly dispersed their tanks to infantry divisions ; but following their observation of the German campaign in France , in late 1940 they began to reorganize most of their armored assets back into mechanized corps with a target strength of 1 @, @ 031 tanks each . But these large armoured formations were unwieldy , and moreover they were spread out in scattered garrisons , with their subordinate divisions up to 100 kilometres apart . Furthermore , the reorganization was still in progress and incomplete when Barbarossa commenced . Soviet tank units were rarely well equipped , and they lacked training and logistical support . Units were sent into combat with no arrangements in place for refueling , ammunition resupply , or personnel replacement . Often , after a single engagement , units were destroyed or rendered ineffective . The Soviet numerical advantage in heavy equipment was thoroughly offset by the superior training and organization of the Wehrmacht .

The Soviet Air Force (VVS) held the numerical advantage with a total of approximately 19 @, @ 533 aircraft , which made it the largest air force in the world in the summer of 1941 . About 7 @, @ 133 ? 9 @, @ 100 of these were deployed in the five western military districts , and an additional

1445 were under Naval control .

Historians have debated whether Stalin was planning an invasion of German territory in the summer of 1941 . The debate began in the late 1980s when Viktor Suvorov published a journal article and later the book Icebreaker in which he stated that Stalin had seen the outbreak of war in western Europe as an opportunity to spread communist revolutions throughout the continent , and that the Soviet military was being deployed for an imminent attack at the time of the German invasion . This view had also been advanced by former German generals following the war . Suvorov 's thesis was fully or partially accepted by some historians , including Valeri Danilov , Joachim Hoffmann , Mikhail Meltyukhov and Vladimir Nevezhin , and attracted public attention in Germany , Israel and Russia . However , it has been strongly rejected by most historians of this period , and Icebreaker is generally considered to be an " anti @-@ Soviet tract " in western countries . David Glantz and Gabriel Gorodetsky wrote books to rebut Suvorov 's arguments , and most historians believe that Stalin was seeking to avoid war in 1941 as he believed that his military was not ready to fight the German forces .

= = Order of battle = =

= = Invasion = =

At around 1 : 00 am on 22 June 1941 , the Soviet military districts in the border area were alerted by NKO Directive No. 1 , which was issued late on night of 21 June . It called on them to " bring all forces to combat readiness , " but to " avoid provocative actions of any kind . " It took up to 2 hours for several of the units subordinate to the Fronts to receive the order of the directive , and the majority did not receive it before the invasion commenced .

At around 3 : 15 am on 22 June 1941 , the Axis Powers commenced the invasion of the Soviet Union with the bombing of major cities in Soviet @-@ occupied Poland and an artillery barrage on Red Army defences on the entire front . The heavy air @-@ raids reached as far as Kronstadt near Leningrad , Ismail in Bessarabia , and Sevastopol in the Crimea . Meanwhile , ground troops crossed the border , accompanied in some locales by Lithuanian and Ukrainian fifth columnists . Roughly three million soldiers of the Wehrmacht went into action and faced slightly fewer Soviet troops at the border .

At around noon , the news of the invasion was broadcast to the population by Soviet foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov : " ... Without a declaration of war , German forces fell on our country , attacked our frontiers in many places ... The Red Army and the whole nation will wage a victorious Patriotic War for our beloved country , for honour , for liberty ... Our cause is just . The enemy will be beaten . Victory will be ours ! " By calling upon the population 's devotion to their nation rather than the Party , Molotov struck a patriotic chord that helped a stunned people absorb the shattering news . Within the first few days of the invasion , the Soviet High Command and Red Army were extensively reorganized so as to place them on the necessary war footing . Stalin did not address the nation about the German invasion until 3 July , when he also called for a " Patriotic War ... of the entire Soviet people " .

In Germany , on the morning of 22 June , Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels announced the invasion to the waking nation in a radio broadcast , " At this moment a march is taking place that , for its extent , compares with the greatest the world has ever seen . I have decided today to place the fate and future of the Reich and our people in the hands of our soldiers . May God aid us , especially in this fight ! " Later the same morning , Hitler proclaimed to his colleagues , " Before three months have passed , we shall witness a collapse of Russia , the like of which has never been seen in history . "

= = Phase one = =

The initial momentum of the German ground and air attack completely destroyed the Soviet

organizational command and control within the first few hours , paralyzing every level of command from the infantry platoon to the Soviet High Command in Moscow . Therefore , Moscow failed to grasp the magnitude of the catastrophe that confronted the Soviet forces in the border area . At around 7 : 15 am , Stalin issued NKO Directive No. 2 , which announced the invasion to the Soviet Armed Forces , and called on them to attack Axis forces wherever they had violated the borders and launch air strikes into the border regions of German territory . At around 9 : 15 pm , Stalin issued NKO Directive No. 3 , signed by Marshal Semyon Timoshenko , which now called for a general counteroffensive on the entire front " without any regards for borders " that both men hoped would sweep the enemy from Soviet territory . Timoshenko 's order was not based on a realistic appraisal of the military situation at hand , and it resulted in devastating casualties .

= = = Air war = = =

Luftwaffe reconnaissance units worked frantically to plot Soviet troop concentration , supply dumps , and airfields , and mark them down for destruction . In contrast , Soviet artillery observers based at the border area had been under the strictest instructions not to open fire on German aircraft prior to the invasion . The Luftwaffe reported to have destroyed 1 @, @ 489 aircraft on the first day of the invasion and over 3 @, @ 100 over the first three days . Hermann Göring , Minister of Aviation and Commander @-@ in @-@ Chief of the Luftwaffe , distrusted the reports and ordered the figure checked . Luftwaffe staffs surveyed the wreckage on Soviet airfields , and their original figure proved conservative , as over 2 @, @ 000 Soviet aircraft were estimated to have been destroyed on the first day of the invasion . In reality , Soviet losses were likely higher ; a Soviet archival document recorded the loss of 3 @, @ 922 Soviet aircraft in the first three days against an estimated loss of 78 German aircraft . The Luftwaffe reported the loss of only 35 aircraft on the first day of combat . A document from the German Federal Archives puts the Luftwaffe 's loss at 63 aircraft for the first day .

By the end of the first week , the Luftwaffe had achieved air supremacy over the battlefields of all the army groups , but was unable to effect this air dominance over the vast expanse of the western Soviet Union . According to the war diaries of the German High Command , the Luftwaffe by 5 July had lost 491 aircraft with 316 more damaged , leaving it with only about 70 percent of the strength it had at the start of the invasion .

= = = Baltic states = = =

On 22 June , Army Group North attacked the Soviet Northwestern Front and broke through its 8th and 11th Armies . The Soviets immediately launched a powerful counterattack against the German 4th Panzer Group with the Soviet 3rd and 12th Mechanized Corps , but the Soviet attack was defeated . On 25 June , the 8th and 11th Armies were ordered to withdraw to the Western Dvina River , where it was planned to meetup with the 21st Mechanized Corps and the 22nd and 27th Armies . However , on 26 June , Erich von Manstein 's LVI Panzer Corps reached the river first and secured a bridgehead across it . The Northwestern Front was forced to abandon the river defenses , and on 29 June Stavka ordered the Front to withdraw to the Stalin Line on the approaches to Leningrad . On 2 July , Army Group North began its attack on the Stalin Line with its 4th Panzer Group , and on 8 July captured Pskov , devastating the defenses of the Stalin Line and reaching Leningrad oblast . The 4th Panzer Group had advanced about 450 kilometres (280 mi) since the start of the invasion and was now only about 250 kilometres (160 mi) from its primary objective Leningrad . On 9 July it began its attack towards the Soviet defenses along the Luga River in Leningrad oblast .

= = = Ukraine and Moldavia = = =

The northern section of Army Group South faced the Southwestern Front , which had the largest concentration of Soviet forces , and the southern section faced the Southern Front . In addition , the

Pripyat Marshes and the Carpathian Mountains posed a serious challenge to the army group's northern and southern sections respectively. On 22 June, only the northern section of Army Group South attacked, but the terrain impeded their assault, giving the Soviet defenders ample time to react. The German 1st Panzer Group and 6th Army attacked and broke through the Soviet 5th Army. Starting on the night of 23 June, the Soviet 22nd and 15th Mechanized Corps attacked the flanks of the 1st Panzer Group from north and south respectively. Although intended to be concerted, Soviet tank units were sent in piecemeal due to poor coordination. The 22nd Mechanized Corp ran into the 1st Panzer Army's III Motorized Corps and was decimated, and its commander killed. The 1st Panzer Group bypassed much of the 15th Mechanized Corps, which engaged the German 6th Army's 297th Infantry Division, where it was defeated by antitank fire and Luftwaffe attacks. On 26 June, the Soviets launched another counterattack on the 1st Panzer Group from north and south simultaneously with the 9th, 19th and 8th Mechanized Corps, which altogether fielded 1649 tanks, and supported by the remnants of the 15th Mechanized Corps. The battle lasted for four days, ending in the defeat of the Soviet tank units. On 30 June Stavka ordered the remaining forces of the Southwestern Front to withdraw to the Stalin Line, where it would defend the approaches to Kiev.

On 2 July, the southern section of Army Group South – the Romanian 3rd and 4th Armies, alongside the German 11th Army – invaded Soviet Moldavia, which was defended by the Southern Front. Counterattacks by the Front's 2nd Mechanized Corps and 9th Army were defeated, but on 9 July the Axis advance stalled along the defenses of the Soviet 18th Army between the Prut and Dniester Rivers.

== = Belorussia == =

In the opening hours of the invasion, the Luftwaffe destroyed the Western Front's air force on the ground, and with the aid of Abwehr and their supporting anti-@-@ communist fifth columns operating in the Soviet rear paralyzed the Front's communication lines, which particularly cut off the Soviet 4th Army headquarters from headquarters above and below it. On the same day, the 2nd Panzer Group crossed the Bug River, broke through the 4th Army, bypassed Brest Fortress, and pressed on towards Minsk, while the 3rd Panzer Group bypassed most of the 3rd Army and pressed on towards Vilnius. Simultaneously, the German 4th and 9th Armies engaged the Western Front forces in the environs of Białystok. On the order of Dmitry Pavlov, the commander of the Western Front, the 6th and 11th Mechanized Corps and the 6th Cavalry Corps launched a strong counterstrike towards Grodno on 24 – 25 June in hopes of destroying the 3rd Panzer Group. However, the 3rd Panzer Group had already moved on, with its forward units reaching Vilnius on the evening of 23 June, and the Western Front's armoured counterattack instead ran into infantry and antitank fire from the V Army Corps of the German 9th Army, supported by Luftwaffe air attacks. By the night of 25 June, the Soviet counterattack was defeated, and the commander of the 6th Cavalry Corps was captured. The same night, Pavlov ordered all the remnants of the Western Front to withdraw to Slonim towards Minsk. Subsequent counterattacks to buy time for the withdrawal were launched against the German forces, but all of them failed. On 27 June, the 2nd and 3rd Panzer Groups met near Minsk and captured the city the next day, completing the encirclement of almost all of the Western Front in two pockets: one around Białystok and another west of Minsk. The Germans destroyed the Soviet 3rd and 10th Armies while inflicting serious losses on the 4th, 11th and 13th Armies, and reported to have captured 324 @,@ 000 Soviet troops, 3 @,@ 300 tanks, 1 @,@ 800 artillery pieces. On 30 June, Stalin relieved Pavlov of his command, and on 22 July tried and executed him along with many members of his staff on charges of "cowardice" and "criminal incompetence".

A Soviet directive was issued on 29 June to combat the mass panic rampant among the civilians and the armed forces personnel. The order stipulated swift, severe measures against anyone inciting panic or displaying cowardice. The NKVD worked with commissars and military commanders to scour possible withdrawal routes of soldiers retreating without military authorization. Field expedient general courts were established to deal with civilians spreading rumours and military

deserters .

On 29 June , Hitler , through the Commander @-@ in @-@ Chief of the German Army Walther von Brauchitsch , instructed the commander of Army Group Center Fedor von Bock to halt the advance of his panzers until the infantry formations liquidating the pockets catch up . But the commander of the 2nd Panzer Group Heinz Guderian , with the tacit support of Fedor von Bock and the chief of OKH Franz Halder , ignored the instruction and attacked on eastward towards Bobruisk , albeit reporting the advance as a reconnaissance @-@ in @-@ force . He also personally conducted an aerial inspection of the Minsk @-@ Bia?ystok pocket on 30 June and concluded that his panzer group was not needed to contain it , since Hermann Hoth 's 3rd Panzer Group was already involved in the Minsk pocket . On the same day , some of the infantry corps of the 9th and 4th Armies , having sufficiently liquidated the Bia?ystok pocket , resumed their march eastward to catch up with the panzer groups . On 1 July , Fedor von Bock ordered the panzer groups to resume their full offensive eastward on the morning of 3 July . But Brauchitsch , upholding Hitler 's instruction , and Halder , unwillingly going along with it , opposed Bock 's order . However , Bock insisted on the order by stating that it would be flatly irresponsible to reverse orders already issued . The panzer groups , however , resumed their offensive on 2 July before the infantry formations had sufficiently caught up .

= = Phase two = =

On 2 July and through the next six days , a rainstorm typical of Belarusian summers slowed the progress of the panzers of Army Group Center , and Soviet defenses stiffened . The delays gave the Soviets time to organize a massive counterattack against Army Group Center . The army group 's ultimate objective was Smolensk , which commanded the road to Moscow . Facing the Germans was an old Soviet defensive line held by six armies . On 6 July , the Soviets attacked the 3rd Panzer Group with 1000 tanks . The Germans defeated this counterattack with overwhelming air superiority . The 2nd Panzer Group crossed the Dnieper River and closed in on Smolensk from the south while the 3rd Panzer Group , after defeating the Soviet counterattack , closed on Smolensk from the north . Trapped between their pincers were three Soviet armies . On 18 July , the Panzer Groups came to within sixteen kilometres of closing the gap , but the trap did not snap shut until 26 July . When the Panzer Groups finally closed the gap , 300 @, @ 000 Red Army soldiers were captured , but 200 @, @ 000 Red Army soldiers escaped to stand between the Germans and Moscow .

Four weeks into the campaign , the Germans realized they had grossly underestimated Soviet strength . The German troops had used their initial supplies without attaining the expected strategic freedom of movement . Operations were now slowed down to allow for resupply ; the delay was to be used to adapt strategy to the new situation . Hitler by now had lost faith in battles of encirclement as large numbers of Soviet soldiers had escaped the pincers . He now believed he could defeat the Soviets by economic damage , depriving them of the industrial capacity to continue the war . That meant seizing the industrial center of Kharkov , the Donbass and the oil fields of the Caucasus in the south and the speedy capture of Leningrad , a major center of military production , in the north .

Fedor von Bock , the commander of Army Group Center , and almost all the German generals involved in Operation Barbarossa argued vehemently in favor of continuing the all @-@ out drive toward Moscow . Besides the psychological importance of capturing the enemy 's capital , the generals pointed out that Moscow was a major center of arms production , the center of the Soviet communications system and an important transportation hub . More significantly , intelligence reports indicated that the bulk of the Red Army was deployed near Moscow under Semyon Timoshenko for an all @-@ out defense of the capital . But Hitler was adamant , and he issued a direct order to the panzer commander Heinz Guderian ? bypassing Guderian 's commanding officer , von Bock ? to send Army Group Center 's tanks to the north and south , temporarily halting the drive to Moscow .

= = Phase three = =

By mid @-@ July , the Germans had advanced within a few kilometers of Kiev below the Pripyat Marshes . The 1st Panzer Group then went south while the 17th Army struck east and trapped three Soviet armies near Uman . As the Germans eliminated the pocket , the tanks turned north and crossed the Dnieper . Meanwhile , the 2nd Panzer Group , diverted from Army Group Center , had crossed the Desna River with 2nd Army on its right flank . The two Panzer armies now trapped four Soviet armies and parts of two others .

By August , as the serviceability and the quantity of the Luftwaffe 's inventory steadily reduced due to combat , while demand for air support only increased as the VVS stubbornly resurged , the Luftwaffe found itself struggling to maintain local air superiority in the front lines . Also with the onset of bad weather in October , the Luftwaffe was on several occasions forced to halt nearly all aerial operations . The VVS , although faced with the same weather difficulties , had a clear advantage thanks to the prewar experience with cold @-@ weather flying techniques , and the fact that they were operating from intact airbases and airports . By December , the VVS had matched the Luftwaffe and was even pressing to achieve air supremacy over the battlefields .

For its final attack on Leningrad , the 4th Panzer Group was reinforced by tanks from Army Group Center . On 8 August , the Panzers broke through the Soviet defenses . By the end of August , 4th Panzer Group had penetrated to within 48 kilometers of Leningrad . The Finns had pushed southeast on both sides of Lake Ladoga to reach the old Finnish @-@ Soviet frontier .

The Germans attacked Leningrad in August 1941 ; in the following three " black months " of 1941 , 400 @,@ 000 residents of the city worked to build the city 's fortifications as fighting continued , while 160 @,@ 000 others joined the ranks of the Red Army . On 7 September , the German 20th Motorized Division seized Shlisselburg , cutting off all land routes to Leningrad . The Germans severed the railroads to Moscow and captured the railroad to Murmansk with Finnish assistance to inaugurate the start of a siege that would last for over two years .

At this stage , Hitler ordered the final destruction of Leningrad with no prisoners taken , and on 9 September , Army Group North began the final push . Within ten days it had advanced within 11 kilometers of the city . However , the push over the last 10 km (6 @.@ 2 mi) proved very slow and casualties mounted . Hitler , now out of patience , ordered that Leningrad should not be stormed , but rather starved into submission . Deprived of its Panzer forces , Army Group Center remained static and was subjected to numerous Soviet counterattacks , in particular the Yelnya Offensive , in which the Germans suffered their first major tactical defeat since their invasion began . These attacks prompted Hitler to concentrate his attention back to Army Group Center and its drive on Moscow . The Germans ordered the 3rd and 4th Panzer Armies to break off their Siege of Leningrad and support Army Group Center in its attack on Moscow .

Before it could begin , operations in Kiev needed to be finished . Half of Army Group Center had swung to the south in the back of the Kiev position , while Army Group South moved to the north from its Dniepr bridgehead . The encirclement of Soviet forces in Kiev was achieved on 16 September . A savage battle ensued in which the Soviets were hammered with tanks , artillery , and aerial bombardment . After ten days of vicious fighting , the Germans claimed over 600 @,@ 000 Soviet soldiers captured . Actual losses were 452 @,@ 720 men , 3 @,@ 867 artillery pieces and mortars from 43 divisions of the 5th , 21st , 26th , and 37th Soviet Armies .

= = Phase four = =

After Kiev , the Red Army no longer outnumbered the Germans and there were no more trained reserves directly available . To defend Moscow , Stalin could field 800 @,@ 000 men in 83 divisions , but no more than 25 divisions were fully effective . Operation Typhoon , the drive to Moscow , began on 2 October . In front of Army Group Center was a series of elaborate defense lines , the first centered on Vyazma and the second on Mozhaysk .

The first blow took the Soviets completely by surprise when the 2nd Panzer Group , returning from the south , took Oryol , just 121 km (75 mi) south of the Soviet first main defense line . Three days later , the Panzers pushed on to Bryansk , while the 2nd Army attacked from the west . The Soviet 3rd and 13th Armies were now encircled . To the north , the 3rd and 4th Panzer Armies attacked

Vyazma , trapping the 19th , 20th , 24th and 32nd Armies . Moscow 's first line of defense had been shattered . The pocket eventually yielded over 500 @, @ 000 Soviet prisoners , bringing the tally since the start of the invasion to three million . The Soviets had now only 90 @, @ 000 men and 150 tanks left for the defense of Moscow .

The German government now publicly predicted the imminent capture of Moscow and convinced foreign correspondents of a pending Soviet collapse . On 13 October , the 3rd Panzer Group penetrated to within 140 km (87 mi) of the capital . Martial law was declared in Moscow . Almost from the beginning of Operation Typhoon , however , the weather worsened . Temperatures fell while there was a continued rainfall . This turned the unpaved road network into mud and steadily slowed the German advance on Moscow to as little as 3 @. @ 2 km (2 @. @ 0 mi) a day . At the same time , the supply situation for the Germans rapidly deteriorated . On 31 October , the German Army High Command ordered a halt to Operation Typhoon while the armies were reorganized . The pause gave the Soviets , who were in a far better supply situation , time to consolidate their positions and organize formations of newly activated reservists . In little over a month , the Soviets organized eleven new armies that included 30 divisions of Siberian troops . These had been freed from the Soviet Far East after Soviet intelligence assured Stalin that there was no longer a threat from the Japanese . Over 1 @, @ 000 tanks and 1 @, @ 000 aircraft arrived along with the Siberian forces .

On 15 November , with the ground hardening due to the cold weather , the Germans once again began the attack on Moscow . Although the troops themselves were now able to advance again , there had been no delay allowed to improve the supply situation . Facing the Germans were the 5th , 16th , 30th , 43rd , 49th , and 50th Soviet armies . The Germans intended to let the 3rd and 4th Panzer Armies cross the Moscow Canal and envelop Moscow from the northeast . The 2nd Panzer Group would attack Tula and then close in on Moscow from the south . As the Soviets reacted to the flanks , the 4th Army would attack the center . In two weeks of desperate fighting , lacking sufficient fuel and ammunition , the Germans slowly crept towards Moscow . However , in the south , the 2nd Panzer Group was being blocked . On 22 November , Soviet Siberian units , augmented with the 49th and 50th Soviet Armies , attacked the 2nd Panzer Group and inflicted a shocking defeat on the Germans . The 4th Panzer Group pushed the Soviet 16th Army back , however , and succeeded in crossing the Moscow canal to begin the attempted encirclement of Moscow .

On 2 December , part of the 258th Infantry Division advanced to within 24 km (15 mi) of Moscow and could see the spires of the Kremlin , but by then the first blizzards had already begun . A reconnaissance battalion also managed to reach the town of Khimki , only about 8 km (5 @. @ 0 mi) away from the Soviet capital . It captured the bridge over the Moscow @- @ Volga Canal as well as the railway station , which marked the farthest eastern advance of German forces . But in spite of the progress made , the Wehrmacht was not equipped for winter warfare , and the bitter cold caused severe problems for their guns and equipment . Furthermore , weather conditions grounded the Luftwaffe from conducting any large @- @ scale operations . Newly created Soviet units near Moscow now numbered over 500 @, @ 000 men , and on 5 December , they launched a massive counterattack as part of the Battle of Moscow that pushed the Germans back over 320 km (200 mi) . By late December 1941 , the Germans had lost the Battle for Moscow , and the invasion had cost the German army over 830 @, @ 000 casualties in killed , wounded , captured or missing in action .

= = Aftermath = =

With the failure of the Battle of Moscow , all German plans for a quick defeat of the Soviet Union had to be revised . The Soviet counteroffensives in December 1941 caused heavy casualties on both sides , but ultimately eliminated the German threat to Moscow .

In addition to this devastating setback for Germany , the Soviet Union also suffered heavily from the conflict , losing huge tracts of territory , and vast losses in men and material . Despite the rapid relocation of Red Army armaments installations east of the Urals and a dramatic increase of production in 1942 , especially of armour , new aircraft types and artillery , the Wehrmacht was able to mount another large @- @ scale offensive in July 1942 . Hitler , having realized that Germany 's

oil supply was " severely depleted , " aimed to capture the oil fields of Baku in an offensive , codenamed Case Blue . Once again , the Germans quickly overran great expanses of Soviet territory , but they failed to achieve their ultimate goals in the wake of their decisive defeat at the Battle of Stalingrad .

By 1943 , Soviet armaments production was fully operational and increasingly outproducing the German war economy . The Red Army through steadily more ambitious and tactically sophisticated offensives was able to liberate the areas previously occupied by the German invasion by the summer of 1944 . The war ended with the total defeat and occupation of Nazi Germany in May 1945 .

= = = War crimes = = =

While the Soviet Union had not signed the Geneva convention , this did not mean their soldiers were entirely exempted from the protection it afforded ; Germany had signed the treaty and was thus obligated to offer Soviet POWs treatment according to its provisions (as they generally did with other Allied POWs) . Article 82 of the convention specified that " In case , in time of war , one of the belligerents is not a party to the Convention , its provisions shall nevertheless remain in force as between the belligerents who are parties thereto . " Despite this Hitler called for the battle against the Soviet Union to be a " struggle for existence " and accordingly authorized crimes against Soviet prisoners of war . A Nazi memorandum from 16 July 1941 , recorded by Martin Bormann , quotes Hitler saying , " The giant [occupied] area must naturally be pacified as quickly as possible ; this will happen at best if anyone who just looks funny should be shot " .

Before the war , Hitler issued the notorious Commissar Order , which called for all Soviet political commissars taken prisoner at the front to be shot immediately without trial . German soldiers both willingly and unwillingly participated in these mass killings . On the eve of the invasion , German soldiers were informed that their battle " demands ruthless and vigorous measures against Bolshevik inciters , guerrillas , saboteurs , Jews and the complete elimination of all active and passive resistance . " Collective punishment was authorized against partisan attacks ; if a perpetrator could not be quickly identified , then burning villages and mass executions were considered acceptable reprisals . An estimated two million Soviet prisoners of war died of starvation during Barbarossa alone ; nothing was done for their survival . The famished prisoners of war were hardly able to walk by themselves . By the end of the war , 58 percent of all Soviet prisoners of war died in German captivity .

Organized crimes against civilians , including women and children , were also carried out on a huge scale by the German police and military forces , as well as the local collaborators . Under the command of the Reich Main Security Office , the Einsatzgruppen killing squads conducted large @-@ scale massacres of Jews and communists in conquered Soviet territories . Holocaust historian Raul Hilberg puts the number of Jews murdered by " mobile killing operations " at 1 @, @ 400 @, @ 000 . The original instructions to kill " Jews in party and state positions " was broadened to include " all male Jews of military age " and was expanded once more to " all male Jews regardless of age . " By the end of July , the Germans were regularly killing women and children . On 18 December 1941 , Himmler and Hitler discussed the " Jewish question " , and Himmler noted the meeting 's result in his appointment book : " To be annihilated as partisans . " According to Christopher Browning , this represented the Nazi decision of " annihilating Jews and solving the so @-@ called ' Jewish question ' under the cover of killing partisans . " In accordance with Nazi policies against " inferior " Asian peoples , Turkmens were also persecuted ; according to a post @-@ war report by Prince Veli Kajum Khan , they were imprisoned in concentration camps in terrible conditions , where those deemed to have " Mongolian " features were murdered daily . Asians were also targeted by the Einsatzgruppen and were the subjects of lethal medical experiments and murder at a " pathological institute " in Kiev .

Burning houses suspected of being partisan meeting places and poisoning water wells became common practice for soldiers of the German 9th Army . At Kharkov , the fourth largest city in the Soviet Union , food was provided only to the small number of civilians who worked for the Germans ,

with the rest designated to slowly starve . Thousands of Soviets were deported to Germany to be used as slave labor .

The citizens of Leningrad were subjected to heavy bombardment and a siege that would last 872 days and starve more than a million people to death , of whom approximately 400 @, @ 000 were children below the age of 14 . The German @-@ Finnish blockade cut off access to food , fuel and raw materials , and rations reached a low , for the non @-@ working population , of four ounces (five thin slices) of bread and a little watery soup per day . Starving Soviet civilians began to eat their domestic animals , along with hair tonic and Vaseline . Some desperate citizens resorted to cannibalism ; Soviet records list 2 @, @ 000 people arrested for " the use of human meat as food " during the siege , 886 of them during the first winter of 1941 ? 42 . The Wehrmacht planned to seal off Leningrad , starve out the population , and then demolish the city entirely .

= = = Historical significance = = =

Operation Barbarossa was the largest military operation in human history ? more men , tanks , guns and aircraft were committed than had ever been deployed before in a single offensive . A total of 75 percent of the entire German military participated . The invasion opened up the Eastern Front of World War II , the largest theater of war during that conflict , and it witnessed titanic clashes of unprecedented violence and destruction for four years that resulted in the deaths of more than 26 million people . More people died fighting on the Eastern Front than in all other fighting across the globe during World War II .

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