

# Operation Barbarossa:

## The Failure of Nazi Ideology at the Eastern Front

by Paul Fleming, Jr.

On June 22, 1941, German troops invaded the USSR, thus beginning one of the most violent and devastating wars ever. The German army (*Wehrmacht*) had begun planning this invasion in July 1940, under the code name Otto, then Fritz, and finally Barbarossa. <1> In planning the invasion, the *Wehrmacht* basically had the choice of two strategies: the first was to wage a war of attrition, while the second was to win by military annihilation in the tradition of Napoleon. <2> In choosing, the Germans would have been wise to consider the consequences the latter strategy had in the invasion of Russia for Napoleon. However, the Germans and their Nazi leaders felt that defeating the Soviet Union would be fairly easy, and thus chose the strategy of military annihilation. One reason for this is that the Nazis had been stressing such traditional German concepts as *Lebensraum* (living space) and *Drang nach Osten* (push to the East), as well as promoting racism and anti-Semitism. <3> All four concepts "justified" a war of annihilation.

The reasons Germany undertook such an invasion are simple. First, in the 1930s the Nazis had made the "struggle" against Bolshevism a "central theme in domestic and foreign policy." <4> Thus a war against Bolshevik Russia was merely the logical outcome of this belief. Secondly, Germany was still at war with Britain, and Hitler believed that if the Soviet Union could be defeated quickly, the British would be more willing to accept peace terms. <5> Moreover, the Germans had had great success and felt that the USSR would be "one more lightening victory, particularly fought against the inferior races of the East." <6> Author Alan Bullock gives a much more practical explanation. He states that, "Hitler invaded Russia for the simple but sufficient reason that he had always meant to establish the foundations of his thousand-year Reich by the annexation of the territory between the Vistula and the Urals." <7> These reasons justified, at least in the minds of the Nazi and *Wehrmacht* leadership, tactics which are today still considered barbaric and immoral.

In the end, the Germans were defeated in Russia, which bore the brunt of German aggression in World War II. It is generally accepted that the German army had the bulk of its troops, as well as its best troops in the East. For these reasons, many consider it Communist Russia who really "won" the Second World War. If the Soviet Union would have fallen quickly, Britain really might have sued for peace with Germany, for the United States had not yet entered the war (and would not for six months after Barbarossa was underway). Thus, the reasons Germany did not achieve victory in Russia are of great importance. One reason is of course, the determination of people of the Soviet Union; another is the problem of fighting a war on two fronts. However, the biggest problem for Germany in the East was the Germans themselves. Germany lost the war in the Soviet Union through bad military planning, much of which was the result of Nazi ideology. The Germans failed to fully exploit the discontent with Stalin and Communism amongst the

indigenous population, and even diminished what support they (the Germans) did have since they were convinced they could achieve victory through annihilating the enemy.

One reason the invasion failed is that Hitler himself got too involved in the decision making (especially for one whose military experience consisted of running messages as a corporal). The Army High Command considered the capture of Moscow essential. [<8>](#) Former General Wladyslaw Anders, of the Polish army who fought both Soviet and German troops between 1939 and 1945, states categorically that the capture of Moscow, which was the center of railway and communications networks, and of Soviet authority, would have made the Red Army tactic of retreating into the interior "impracticable." [<9>](#) Despite this, Hitler did not heed their advice, and put Moscow on a level of secondary importance. [<10>](#) Hitler, extremely overconfident, felt the German army could defeat the USSR. in two or three months, and therefore did not adequately prepare for a winter campaign. [<11>](#) As Bullock notes:

From early November the Germans were fighting in sub-zero temperatures, intensified by a bitter wind, the few hours of daylight and the long nights, and fighting in an unfamiliar land against an enemy inured to the conditions, warmly clothed and equipped for winter operations. [<12>](#)

Here it is easy to see that not only was Hitler's military strategy faulty, but his planning (or lack of it) forced the army to endure conditions which were extreme, to say the least.

Besides blunders in strategic planning, the Nazi leadership also hurt the German cause in the East by promoting its racist ideology. Nazi propaganda "prepared the soil for the concept of "*Untermensch*" (human beings of lesser value)." [<13>](#) The Nazis and the *Wehrmacht* rationalized that the Russians and the Jews merited harsh treatment, because of their racial inferiority. [<14>](#) Also, as has already been stated, the Germans planned on using much of this land for their *Lebensraum*. Hitler basically wanted the European portion of the Soviet Union, from Archangel on the White Sea to Astrakhan on the Caspian Sea (the "AA Line"). [<15>](#) Therefore, the majority of the people living there would have to be moved, and this was to be accomplished by "harsh" (barbaric) measures. Prior to the invasion, in June 1941, the OKW and OKH issued the so-called "criminal orders" which, among other things, provided for the execution of civilians! [<16>](#) These policies along with those dealing with prisoners of war and indigenous personnel willing to help Germany contributed to the German defeat. [<17>](#) As author Frederick Schuman sums it up, "The Nazi cult of violence doomed the Nazi leaders, in the end to death." [<18>](#) Thus, the racist ideology promoted by Hitler and the Nazis led to the justification of extreme violence, even in the context of warfare, against the indigenous population of the Soviet Union, which was counter productive. The masses of the Soviet Union were discontent with Stalin, and had Hitler been a little more flexible -- even temporarily -- the results might have been different for Germany.

Nazi ideology, it has already been stated, paved the way for inhuman treatment of the population of the Soviet Union. The rule of Stalin had been so harsh that when the German army invaded the Soviet Union, a substantial portion of the population

considered them (the Germans) "liberators." <19> Many peasants even willingly brought the invading armies food. <20> Considering the rule of Stalin, the Germans must have had to have been really brutal to alienate this already disaffected population. One Nazi official had stated, "The Slavs should work for us. If they are of no use -- let them die. . . . As for supplies, they will get only the bare necessities." <21> Another official, Heinrich Himmler, said in 1943 that:

What happens to a Russian, to a Czech, does not interest me in the slightest. . . . Whether nations live in prosperity or starve to death interest me only so far as we need them as slaves for our culture; otherwise it is of no interest to me. Whether 10,000 Russian females fall down from exhaustion while digging an anti-tank ditch interests me only in so far as the tank ditch for Germany is finished. <22>

Even though these statements were not public, the action of the German army demonstrates that it was adhering to the principles of the Nazi leaders. Stalin may have had little to offer the population, but the Germans had absolutely nothing except death and enslavement. If anyone had serious misgivings about their treatment of the indigenous population they were quickly rationalized away. Inferiority justified harsh treatment. The early success of the *Wehrmacht* reinforced the concept of the inferiority of the Russians and other nationalities in the Soviet Union. <23> There had been many people willing to fight their own countrymen alongside the Germans, but their number quickly diminished when word spread of the treatment which they, and the peasantry and prisoners of war were receiving.

It was no small number of Russians who were quite eager to fight the Red Army. It has been estimated that when the German army moved on Stalingrad, accompanying them were about a half a million Soviet volunteers. <24> This number is questionable, but it is true that there was an organized effort to aid the Germans. As late as the end of 1942, the Russian National Committee was formed which issued the anti-Stalin Smolensk Manifesto, which urged all Red Army personnel to desert and to fight with the Germans. <25> If the population was this determined to aid the Germans, the Germans must have been even more determined to convince them not to. The failure of the Germans to use this situation to their advantage was one reason [the prime one in my mind] for their defeat in the East. <26> One reason they did not do so is their racist ideology-the Slavs were "the Nazi symbol of depravity, cowardice, and disloyalty second only to the Jews." <27>

Many of the people who had volunteered to help the Germans were Red Army soldiers who had surrendered. It is estimated that by mid October, the German army had captured over two million Soviets. <28> Many of those who surrendered expected favorable treatment; of course the Germans did not accommodate them. For instance, the commander of the 12th Infantry Division directed that in regards to Russians, "Shoot as a general principal! Every soldier shoots any Russian soldier found behind the front line." <29> This no doubt provided a disincentive for surrender. Moreover, the behavior of the Germans boosted the morale of the Red Army and gave the Soviet propaganda machine something it could use. <30> Many Russian POWs were starved to death as part of an

attempt at extermination. [\(31\)](#) Others died because the German army was ordered not to provide medical assistance to Russian POWs: the Russians could only use Russian doctors, and Russian supplies, equipment, transportation, and facilities. [\(32\)](#) If this were not enough, the ill-equipped German soldiers began stealing winter clothes and boots from POWs (also from civilians), which caused many more deaths. [\(33\)](#) Goering attempted to justify the treatment of Russian POWs by stating that the USSR had not signed the Geneva Convention. [\(34\)](#) The extent to which Russian POWs suffered can be seen as follows: it is estimated that during the course of the war in the Soviet Union 5.7 million Russians were taken prisoner. [\(35\)](#) Estimates for deaths during captivity vary. One source puts it at 3.3 million. [\(36\)](#) Another puts the death rate as high as 4.7 million. [\(37\)](#) In any event, the prospect of being captured by the Germans was rather grim. While I am not a military man, it seems to me that persuading the enemy to surrender should be something to strive for.

While the treatment of POW's by the Germans was harsh, it was not as bad as the treatment of civilians, who for the most part had not even fought the Germans, and in many cases actually aided them. Nazi propaganda had convinced the men in the army to view the Russians as a "conglomeration of animals." [\(38\)](#) The Germans under their Nazi leaders were "insanely bent upon the enslavement or butchery of all *Untermenschen*. . ." [\(39\)](#) This policy was implemented in the previously mentioned "criminal orders" which provided the German army with a "blank cheque for the mass killing of civilians." [\(40\)](#) And this they did. A resident of Leningrad at the time noted that the Germans "killed without regarding age or sex." [\(41\)](#) No safety was guaranteed to refugees. By late July 1941, the German army went as far as to start shooting all refugees. [\(42\)](#) Civilians were also shot for such reasons as breaking curfew or being caught outside without a pass. [\(43\)](#) In an effort to hamper partisan activity, houses in which the Germans thought partisans were hiding were burned with the occupants inside. [\(44\)](#) When winter came, the peasants were really at the mercy of the unmerciful German soldiers. Many peasants were marched into woods or fields when the temperature was as low as 40 degrees Fahrenheit, stripped of their clothes, and left to freeze to death. [\(45\)](#) Collective measures were also used against civilians. For instance on January 30, 1942, after a German sled had "driven on some mines in the vicinity of the village of Nov Ladomiry, the whole male population of the village was shot and the houses burned down as a 'collective measure'." [sic] [\(46\)](#) With the Germans treating the civilian population like this it is no small wonder they quickly lost the support of the people who once looked to them as "liberators."

The German army, through their mistreatment of the population of the Soviet Union, hurt themselves in the end. There were people willing to aid the Germans, but the Germans considered them sub-human and refused their help (at least in any degree to render it effective). Many soldiers in the Red Army surrendered after putting up a nominal struggle, but German policy towards them discouraged others from doing the same. The peasants once welcomed the German armies by bringing them food, but that, too, changed after the German army indulged in murder and robbery. The attitudes of the German army was no doubt rooted in the extreme racism of the Nazis. It is my belief that it was primarily this racism that led to the murderous activity, which had the end result of

losing the war in the Soviet Union (and thus, probably the entire Second World War) for the Germans. If anything good can come of racism and murder, perhaps this was it.

## Notes

1 Bryan I. Fugate, *Operation Barbarossa: Strategy and Tactics on the Eastern Front, 1941* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1984), p. 61.

2 Wladyslaw Anders, *Hitler's Defeat in Russia* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1953), pp. 15-16.

3 Anders, p. 162.

4 Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, "The Third Reich, 1933-1945: A Sketch," in *Contemporary Germany: Politics and Culture*, ed. Charles Burdick, Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, and Winfried Kudszus (Boulder: Westview Press, 1984), p. 36.

5 Ohto Manninen, "Operation Barbarossa and the Nordic Countries," in *Scandinavia during the Second World War*, ed. Henrik S. Nissen, trans. Thomas Munch-Petersen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 139.

6 Omer Bartov, *The Eastern Front, 1941-45, German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), p. 87.

7 Alan Bullock, *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* (1962, New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 381.

8 Bullock, p. 382.

9 Anders, p. 29.

10 Anders, p. 30.

11 Bullock, pp. 381-382.

12 Bullock, p. 660.

13 Jacobsen, p. 36.

14 Bartov, p. 85.

15 Wallace Carroll, "It takes a Russian to beat a Russian," *Life* (19 December 1949), p. 82.

16 Bartov, p. 106. 17 Anders, p. 161.

18 Frederick L. Schuman, *Russia since 1917: Four Decades of Soviet Politics* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1957), p. 280.

19 Schuman, p. 279.

20 Anders, p. 205.

21 Quoted in Anders, p. 163.

22 Quoted in George Fischer, *Soviet Opposition to Stalin* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952), p. 72.

23 John Erickson, *The Road to Stalingrad* (1975, Boulder: Westview Press, 1984), p. 232.

24 Carroll, p. 82.

25 Fischer, pp. 59-60.

26 Bullock, p. 405.

27 Fischer, p. 49.

28 Carroll, p. 81.

29 Bartov, p. 110.

30 Anders, pp. 170-172.

31 Bartov, pp. 111- 112.

32 Bartov, pp. 112-113.

33 Bartov, p. 112.

34 Fischer, p. 44.

35 Fugate, p. 292.

36 Bartov, p. 107.

37 Fugate, p. 292.

38 Erickson, p. 232.

39 Schuman, p. 279.

40 Bartov, p. 119.

41 Dmitri V. Pavlov, *Leningrad 1941: The Blockade*, trans. John Clinton Adams (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 126.

42 Bartov, p. 125.

43 Bartov, p. 121.

44 Bartov, p. 121.

45 Anders, pp. 206-207.

46 Bartov, p. 120.

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