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Death Ride of the *Wehrmacht*: **Russia 1941**

(Lecture Tour base on book “Barbarossa Unleashed”)

(**Note:** Lecture can run as long as **90** minutes, or be reduced to ca. **45-60** minutes;¹ I will discuss the drive of German Army Group Center toward Moscow in the summer of **1941**, focusing on a number of key themes: Planning & Preparations, Operational & tactical details, logistics, cultural collisions, war crimes, reasons for failure of *Barbarossa*, to name several. Overarching theme of my discussion will be that the fighting in Russia from June – December 1941 not only administered a *blow to the German Army from which it never completely recovered*, but, in a very real way, inaugurated the long, slow decline of the Soviet Union.)

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said that there is “properly no history; only biography,” and to reread Foote is to see how the *greatest historians are those who recognize that the past, like the present, is shaped by flawed, flesh-and-blood individuals, from presidents to foot soldiers.* (Jon Meacham, “*Shelby Foote’s War Story*,” quoted at: powerlineblog.com)

Shelby Foote on his Civil War trilogy: “I have never enjoyed writing so much as I do this writing,” he wrote. *“It goes dreadful slow; sometimes I feel like I’m trying to bail out the Mississippi with a teacup; but I like it, I like it.”* (Jon Meacham, “*Shelby Foote’s War Story*,” quoted at: powerlineblog.com)

As some blogger recently asserted: *“History is not a bedtime story about bunnies and kittens.”*(James Howard Kunstler at kunstler.com)

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¹ **Note:** My presentation at UCSB in Feb 2015 is to run **45-50** minutes.

I. Introduction

-- Operation *Barbarossa*, Adolf Hitler's surprise attack on Soviet Russia in the summer of 1941, and the four-year war between Germany and Russia it unleashed, was – by virtue of any yardstick – the greatest, most horrific military campaign the world has ever witnessed. According to noted British historian, Paul Johnson, Sunday, 22 June 1941 – the day *Barbarossa* began – was the most significant day of 20th Century – the beginning of a “*voyage into darkness and the farthest reaches of hell*” (to borrow from a recent documentary on a related topic). The world-historical and existential clash between Germany and Soviet Russia literally *altered the arc of human history* – for example, it witnessed the beginning of the “final solution” against European Jewry, which culminated in creation of State of Israel; and it ended with the Soviet advance into the heart of Europe and its division into two competing and ideologically antagonistic blocks, culminating in a Cold War which continued for 45 years.

-- It was without question one of the most barbaric – and perhaps the most costly – conflict in recorded history. As renowned English military historian John Keegan keenly observes, the frontier battles were “fought with a brutality and ruthlessness not yet displayed in the Second World War,

perhaps not seen in Europe since the struggle between Christians and Muslims in the Ottoman wars of the 16th Century.”

-- The war lasted for **1418** days (22 Jun 41 – 8 May 45); over **4,000,000** German soldiers and as many as **27,000,000** Russians (soldiers & civilians alike) would perish in the meat grinder that was the Russian front. The Russian people lost an average of almost **20,000** human beings per day for nearly four years. (By way of comparison, in Afghanistan and Iraq combined, since 2001, U.S. forces have suffered less than **10,000** fatalities.)

-- Although the Soviet Union emerged victorious, and built a large empire in eastern Europe which lasted for nearly five decades, it *never really recovered from the overall effects of the war* (demographically, economically, politically, by any measure). Thus, as odd as it may seem, the destruction wrought by the soldiers of Hitler’s *Wehrmacht* actually set the stage for the long, inexorable decline, and eventual collapse, of the Soviet Union 50 years later.

-- In my talk, I will summarize the course of Operation *Barbarossa*; then I will focus on a few key themes integral to the subject matter.

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II. Strategic background and preparations for the Campaign

Background:

Let's begin by briefly examining the situation in Europe as it existed after the Fall of France in **June 1940**. The German victory over France shocked the world; Hitler's victorious armies had accomplished in six-weeks what the armies of Imperial Germany had been unable to do in four years (**1914/18**)! Adolf Hitler was now at the pinnacle of his power & popularity in Germany, which dominated the European continent from Norway to the Pyrenees. The "Fueher" was certainly the "man of the hour," and everyone awaited his next moved.

In July 1940, Hitler unleashed his *Luftwaffe* in an effort to bring a defiant England to her knees, or, at very least, to establish the prerequisite of air superiority for a planned invasion of England – Operation "Sealion." By late **September 1940**, however, it was clear that the air campaign over England had failed (even though it would continue through the winter of 1940/41 at

reduced intensity). The failure of the air campaign, in turn, compelled Hitler to drop his plans for Sealion.

As a consequence, by the fall of **1940**, Hitler faced a major *strategic dilemma* – Just how was he to maintain the initiative – what the Germans call “*das Gesetz des Handels*”? For as Hitler knew only too well, to forfeit that momentum, to stagnate, was to court almost inevitable defeat in the years ahead, when the sea and naval power of Britain and America came into play, along w/ the rapidly expanding military might of Stalin’s Russia. Hitler needed to act, and act quickly!

Hitler’s initial moves at this time involved several *diplomatic démarches* – most importantly with Franco’s Spain and Vichy France, in an effort to shepherd both parties into a Continental Block w/ Germany aimed at England. Yet these initiatives also fell flat. That said, it is certainly true that Hitler’s heart was never really in them. For immediately after France’s collapse he was looking to the east! Indeed, he asked his Army High Command to explore the possibility of attacking Russia in the fall of **1940** – a silly idea which was quickly squashed by his generals as utterly impractical. But no matter, Hitler asked his Army High Command to begin

planning for an attack on the Soviet Union, w/ all preparations to be completed by May 1941.

Hitler's proximate reason for moving against Russia thus emerged – organically, if you will – from the geo-strategic calculus which existed from late **1940** on: He had no way at the moment to subdue England, and he was certain that, by **1942**, at the latest, he would also be fighting Roosevelt's America. And, of course, Russia's burgeoning military power loomed to the east. To withstand the *force majeure* of Anglo-American sea and naval power there was but one option open to him – to attack Soviet Russia in 1941 – before she was ready to move herself! – subdue her, and rape her of her resources – the grain of the Ukraine, the coal of the Donbas, the oil of the Caucasus. By ruthlessly exploiting these resources – along with those of Western Europe – Hitler hoped to establish a firm, autarkic basis of economic power from which to challenge his remaining adversaries in a final global struggle for *Weltmacht* – World Power!

Yet there were other reasons as well why Hitler wanted to settle, once and for all, with the Bolshevik enemy to the east. These reasons derive from what we can call Hitler's *programmatic views*. These were formed in the

1920s and laid down in his book *Mein Kampf*. They included Hitler's call for German *Lebensraum*, or living space, in the east, which was needed, so he thought, to accommodate the large growth in the German population since the late 19th Century. Germany, perforce, needed land in the east to survive. Moreover, the Bolshevik-Jewish enemy represented by Communist Russia posed a mortal threat to Germany. Here we see the tendency to conflate the dangers posed by Bolshevism w/ the putative existential threat of World Jewry.)

German Planning for Eastern Campaign:

As indicated, at Hitler's direction, German planning for Operation *Barbarossa* began in the summer of 1940, and was largely conducted by his Army High Command; several operational studies were produced in the subsequent months, including a study by General Eric Marcks at the behest of the Chief of the German General Staff, Col.-Gen. Franz Halder (and, I might add, incorporating all of Halder's operational concepts).² The final *Barbarossa* directive was promulgated in Dec 41.

² **Note:** General Marcks killed by an Allied fighter bomber in summer of 1944; he had, if I recall correctly, already lost two sons in the war.

Before we discuss details of this planning, I'd like to address the reactions of Hitler's Generals to their "Fuehrer's" decision to move against Russia: Simply put, only a brave few protested the decision; Panzer General Heinz Guderian was, at first, a severe critic of the plan to attack Russia, but in the months and weeks ahead he would openly abandon his opposition. Yet the lack of resistance from Hitler's generals is understandable: After the Fall of France, Hitler was at the pinnacle of power and simply too strong to resist. And if some felt ambivalent at best about the decision, others supported it strongly. Yet here's the vital point! – almost none of Hitler's generals believed that Russia would make for a formidable adversary.

General Staff preparations (briefly discuss / inadequacy of)

-- As a result, German preparations for the Russian campaign were based on a fatal underestimation of the Russian enemy: The Germans had not been impressed by the Russian performance in Poland in September 1939, and even less so by their protracted and costly winter war w/ Finland in 1939/40. That said, the historical German perception of Russia – the so-called "*Russlandbild*" of Germany's civilian and military leadership – was highly conflicted from the late 19th Century on. Simply put, they greatly feared the rapid demographic growth of Slavic Russia, and endured nightmares of

being overrun by “Russian hordes;” at the same time, they tended to sneer at the actual capabilities of Russian or Soviet forces in the field.

-- Be that as it may, the core of German planning envisaged a lightning campaign to surround and annihilate the bulk of Soviet forces west of Dnepr/Dvina River lines! This mission was to be carried out in large part by the so-called “*schnelle Truppen*” – the vaunted motorized and armored forces which had overrun all of Western Europe, and, in spring 1941, were to overrun the Balkans as well. However, these “*schnelle Truppen*” only comprised about **20%** of the attacking German force (the rest being foot-slogging infantry divisions which basically moved at the same pace as the armies of Caesar, Alexander, or Napoleon). And if this relatively diminutive “tip of the spear” failed to achieve its mission, there was simply no “Plan B?” But, no matter – after all, how could it fail. For there was nothing the German soldier could not do!

-- German military planners – in their hubris – had forgotten the injunction of the brilliant Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke, Chief of the Prussian / German General Staff for 30 years in the late 19th Century: That is, “No battle plan survives initial contact w/ the enemy!”

-- Moreover, German planners also failed to account adequately for the *friction* of war (to use Clausewitz's famous term), which, among other factors, embraced the poor road and rail infrastructure inside Soviet Russia, which would slow and disrupt the German advance.

-- Finally, I should also point out that, beyond the unanimity that existed for the initial – and, hopefully, decisive! – phase of the campaign – that is, the encirclement of the bulk of the Red Army west of the Dvina/Dnepr river barriers - there was no agreement between Hitler and his generals for the second phase of the campaign – should their armies advance on Moscow, or Leningrad and the Ukraine? This vital decision was left unresolved! That said, the language in the *Barbarossa* directive did support Hitler's position that, following the capture of Smolensk (the first major operational objective of Army Group Center), strong mechanized forces from GFM v. Bock's Army Group would be sent north, to help GFM v. Leeb's forces clear the Baltic and capture Leningrad. Chief of the General Staff Halder, however, was not disturbed by this language, convinced as he was that the irresistible momentum along the central axis of attack would sweep Hitler along with it and keep the tanks moving on Moscow!)

-- And what about the correlation of forces (German & Soviet)?: Germany's *Ostheer*, or Eastern Army, had, by June 1941, amassed an aggregate of **150** divisions, **3500** tanks/assault guns, **2500** acft along the demarcation line w/ Soviet Russia. In doing so, they were able to concentrate overwhelming numerical superiorities at key focal points of their attack. That said, while the Germans had accurately assessed Soviet strength in the frontier regions, they were blissfully ignorant of the great depth – and overall size – of the Soviet armed forces. All told, the Red Army embraced some five million men organized into **300** divisions; of these, **171** divisions (nearly **3** million men) were stationed in the western theater. These forces were buttressed by power strategic reserves about which Germans knew very little. Also unknown to them, the Russians possessed some **20,000** tanks; while most of these were clearly superannuated models, more than **1500** were the modern and highly capable T-34 and KV model tanks, for which the Germans would have no answer in 1941. German intelligence had also failed to accurately gauge the size of the Russian air force (nearly **20,000** acft),³ and though it would be badly crippled in the opening days of the campaign, it would, the

³ **Note:** Most of the VVS obsolete in June 1941, however,

like Red Army as a whole, surprise the invading Germans by its extraordinary powers of regeneration and reconstitution.

-- One final point: Looking back, it is truly shocking to realize that the overall German invasion force was barely larger than the armies Germany had assembled a year before for the attack on France! But oh my, the challenges involved in attacking Soviet Russia – to mention but one, her prodigious geographical size and, thus, strategic depth – were so infinitely greater!

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III. Brief synopsis of Operation Barbarossa (Jun-Dec 41)

(Pre-emptive or Preventive War? I'd like to begin by bringing attention to a rather cantankerous debate which has roiled the academic community for some time – Was Hitler's attack on Soviet Russia *pre-emptive* or *preventive* in nature? Pre-emptive war is defined as "action to forestall or deflect a threat which is 'imminent and overwhelming.'" This concept actually enjoys a "respectable pedigree" in international law. Preventive war, on the other hand – is defined as "acting to prevent a threat from materializing which does not yet exist."⁴ This concept enjoys less "legal favor." Was Hitler's

⁴ **Note:** Definitions are those of historian Chris Bellamy.

attack pre-emptive? Certainly not! For existing German records reveal no serious fears that the Soviet Union was about to launch an imminent attack in the summer of 1941. Was Operation *Barbarossa* preventive in nature? Surprisingly enough, one could make a good case for answering this question in the affirmative! For exciting new research into the Soviet archives (most importantly by Polish-born historian Brogdan Musial), has confirmed that Stalin himself was preparing an attack on Germany for 1942/43!)

Summer Campaign of 1941:

-- Sunday, 22 June 1941:

-- German forces advance in three large army groups along three distinct axes: Army Group North (GFM v. Leeb) on Leningrad, Army Group Center (GFM v. Bock) on Moscow, and Army Group South (GFM v. Rundstedt) on the Ukraine. I should note that Army Group Center made up about **40%** of the attacking German force structure, including two of the four large German tank, or panzer, groups.

-- The German Army of **1941** was a brilliant fighting force (well trained, equipped, experienced and successful!) As historian Dennis Showalter and

others have pointed out, the “tip of the spear,” the armored/mechanized units, were at very top of their game in summer of 1941.

-- Along the central axis, the Germans employed brilliant operational/tactical techniques to encircle and destroy enormous enemy forces in great battles of annihilation (*Vernichtungsschlacht*) – first at Minsk in White Russia in early July, then at Smolensk by early Aug 41. And it may surprise you to learn that the German invaders greeted as liberators in Eastern Poland, Baltic States and the Ukraine. Newsreels reveal this, as do the letters & diaries of German veterans themselves.

-- Yet these brilliant victories also had their flaws: You see, as I hinted at above, there were really *two German armies* – the “*schnelle Truppen*” (i.e., the mechanized formations) and the foot-slogging infantry which, of course, moved at a much slower pace. This created serious operational difficulties for the Germans and made it impossible for them to fully close and seal their pockets around the enemy, which, in turn, enabled tens of thousands of Red Army troops to escape to fight another day.

-- Moreover, by mid-**July 1941**, the invaders were beginning to lose their momentum as attacking forces fanned out deeper into European Russia.

(Note: Go to map! Point out European Russia's funnel shape, and impact it had on German advance).

-- In fact, to mid-July, the German advance had averaged ca. **20** km per day; in weeks that followed it fell off to just **4-5** km/day. This precipitous decline, of course, was also due to stiffening Soviet resistance, as well as ever more tenuous German supply lines as they moved farther from their jumping off bases, etc.)

-- **30 July 1941:** On Hitler's orders, the advance of Army Group Center comes to a halt, having pushed 600/700 kilometers from its start-line six weeks before. At this point we see the transition to a war of position (*Stellungskrieg*) in the central sector which would last for two months (Aug/Sep 41), with GFM von Bock's forces still some **300** kilometers west of Moscow. As letters, diaries and memoirs reveal, the average German *Landser* was simply stunned by this decision to halt the advance. They were so close, just **300** kilometers away! And they desperately wanted to finish the job and be home to their families before Christmas.

-- **10 August 1941:** Interestingly, even some civilians were beginning to suspect that all was not right on the Russian Front. For example, the fiancée of Dr. Heinz Haape (6 ID), Martha Arazym was, by now sensing problems in Russia: In her letter to Heinz on this day, she notes that she has watched another *Wochenschau*, depicting events in Russia. She finds it deeply disturbing; she is also beginning to realize (perhaps w/ help of letters from Heinz?) that “*der Russe*” is a much tougher opponent than the Germans had imagined: “*Wir haben uns doch eine falsche Vorstellung von diesem Gegner gemacht. Wir dachten in 4-6 Wochen wird dieser Feind geschlagen sein!*”

Action Moves to the Flanks: Leningrad / Kiev *Kesselschlacht*

-- With Army Group Center temporarily standing down, the action shifted to the flanks – to Leningrad and the Ukraine:

-- Leningrad: Advancing thru very difficult terrain – terrain fought over by the Teutonic Knights centuries before – German forces reached the suburbs of Leningrad in Sep 41; then they, too, stood down. Leningrad was now surrounded, and Hitler had already levied his decision to starve city and its

inhabitants into submission. The result was a horrific siege, which would last for **900** days – until January 1944.

-- Ukraine: Also in Sep 41, a classic *Vernichtungsschlacht* – or battle of annihilation, the goal of every German military planner since **1914**, in emulation of Count von Schlieffen – played out in the south, in the Ukraine around its capital of Kiev. The going in the south had, initially, been much tougher for the Germans, here fighting against Soviet Southwestern Front. A massive tank battle took place in the frontier regions in late June & early July, which eventually went the Germans way. In the weeks which followed, due to Stalin's obdurate refusal to give up Kiev, a dangerous bulge began to build in the Soviet lines, as German forces inexorably washed around the flanks of Southwestern Front. In late August, Guderian's Panzer Group (from Army Group Center) began to drive south, while the armor of Army Group South pushed east across the Dnepr River and then wheeled to the north. In mid-September, the two spearheads met, encircling most of the Soviet forces in the Ukraine. In less than two weeks time, the Germans partially, or completely, annihilated six Soviet armies (more than **50** divisions), and captured some **650,000** prisoners. It was the greatest cauldron battle of all time.

-- Major Controversy about this Kiev operation and it is this: Did Hitler throw away any chance to emerge victorious from the summer campaign by turning south and away from Moscow? Historians are still very much divided about this, and I should point out that Hitler and his generals had argued for weeks, in July/August, about what the next move should be after the frontier battles had failed to annihilate the bulk of Soviet forces west of the Dvina/Dniepr river lines, as envisaged in the Barbarossa directive. While the generals, of course, wanted to move directly on Moscow – the political, psychological, and transportation hub of Soviet Russia – Hitler, thinking more in economic than military terms, favored operations on the wings – against Leningrad and the Ukraine. His decisions, I should point out, also made good military sense – for, by attacking on both flanks, he was able to clear those flanks of the enemy before his forces in the center moved on Moscow.

Operation “Typhoon” and failure of Operation *Barbarossa*. (Fall 1941)

-- The renewed push on Moscow finally got underway on 2 October 1941 and, at first, was a spectacular success. Within a week Hitler and his High

Command were firmly convinced the war was finally won! There was elation at Hitler's East Prussian HQ.

-- Once again, the Germans displayed operational and tactical brilliance, encircling and destroying well over half a million Red Army troops in several large pockets (Vi'azma, Briansk).

-- Yet these encirclement battles were also quite costly for the Germans. In fact, Soviet resistance within the pockets was tenacious, tying down dozens of German divisions and delaying their release for the conduct of pursuit operations.⁵ Russian escape attempts caused heavy German casualties among some of the encircling units; in a letter to GFM v. Bock on **18 October**, the commander of **7 PD** informed the field marshal that, on **11/12 October**, his division had lost **1000** men; and that an entire battalion had been "literally . . . wiped out" in its positions north of Viaz'ma. The desperate nature of the fighting in the Viaz'ma pocket is graphically described in a letter written a few days later by *Major* Werner Heinemann, a battalion commander in **23 ID**:

⁵ **Note:** According to the eminent historian David M. Glantz, Bock was forced to commit 48 divisions – well over half his total divisions – for a period of 7-14 days to break Red Army resistance in the twin encirclements, thus "losing the opportunity to exploit the empty defenses west of Moscow." D. M. Glantz, *Barbarossa*, 158.

The recent events of **10-15 October** in the encirclement of Viaz'ma were the worst strain on the nerves. On 10 [October] my battalion struck a withdrawing Russian division; we took **7000** prisoners on this one day alone. But to float around quite literally like tiny little islands in the rear area of a hundred-fold superior enemy army, cut off from all supplies and communications, surrounded on all sides in the immense forests by desperately fighting Russians – those were bitter days.

We really breathed down their neck . . . but for us leaders, left to rely entirely on ourselves, that was a dreadful strain; I stood alone with my battalion for 6 days, for days at a time without any radio link to my regiment. And back home they were all rubbing their hands and saying: “Great! – 6 armies in a cauldron and over half a million prisoners!” What do they know about what that means! Because each [Russian] has a weapon in his hand and wants, come what may, to get out of the cauldron, to get back to his home. Our slender ring gave way here and there on dozens of occasions, and we were the ones encircled.

My God, those nights in the forests, icy nights in biting frost
and snow!

-- **October 6** had brought the first snow, and the days which followed witnessed the beginning of what the Russians call the *Rasputitsa* (literally the “time w/o roads”), as never-ending downpours of rain and ice transformed the Russian roadways in gooey quagmires of mud and slush. Hence, the advance slowed to a crawl in mid-late **Oct 41**. The Germans, of course, were privy to this period of fall rain/mud, but until caught up in it, had no real concept as to its extent or crippling impact on movement and operations. (Photos from this period are truly amazing to examine – revealing vehicles, heavy weapons, horses, etc., virtually swallowed up in mud & muck and utterly immobile!) By **30 October 1941**, the advance in the center had ceased along entire line.

-- Following advent of a permanent frost, the offensive resumed in mid-Nov 41, but made little progress. By the end of November, Army Group’s Center’s losses had increased to **120,996** men since the start of “Typhoon.” Even Halder (Chief of the Army General Staff), in a moment of sober reflection, was compelled to admit that Germany would never again possess

an Army as magnificent as the *Ostheer* of June 1941. On **1 Dec 41**, GFM von Bock dispatched a gloomy teletype message to OKH, outlining the desperate state of his army group, which was approaching the end of its strength; moreover, the notion that the enemy in front of him was collapsing was simply a fantasy, he said. And here we see the disconnect between Hitler and his High Command, at their Wolf's Lair HQ in forests of East Prussia, and the fighting generals at the front! The field marshal, who was now suffering from severe stomach cramps, proposed that his attack be broken off, and that the army group withdrawn to a shorter and more defensible line.

-- Yet neither Hitler nor his High Command were as yet prepared to take such a momentous step, which would have signified final failure of Operation *Barbarossa*; more to the point, they persisted in underestimating the difficulties of Army Group Center while overestimating those of their adversary. So the offensive went on, although by now it had largely been reduced to a series of disjointed tactical actions wholly devoid of operational effect.

-- With surviving German forces having reached a point of total exhaustion, the advance would come to a halt just days later. Total German losses since 22 June were now approaching one million men; panzer divisions had been gutted and possessed but a handful of tanks, while the remaining combat infantry was too weak to advance.

-- **5 December 1941** – At Guderian’s forward CP south of Tula, on Count Leo Tolstoy’s estate, the temperature suddenly plummeted to **-35** Centigrade. Vehicles no longer started; engines froze while they ran; the breaches of artillery pieces froze shut; tank turrets froze solid; machine guns jammed; artillery fire became irregular (the gunpowder seemed to burn differently); radios quit functioning. With Army Group Center immobilized by the frost, and having reached the very end of its combat strength, the entire offensive was suspended, Bock’s shattered divisions going over to the defensive in the positions they had attained. Since **15 November**, they had advanced **80-110** kilometers, reaching the “very threshold of the Soviet capital.” Reinhardt’s 3 and Hoepner’s 4 Panzer Groups were barely **25-30** kilometers from the outskirts of Moscow, astride the Leningrad, Piatitskoe and Volokolamsk roads; in the center, German Fourth Army was within **40** kilometers of the capital. In the south, however, Guderian’s advance had

been halted just south of Kashira by fierce Soviet counterattacks, while he had also failed in his bid to capture Tula (even though the panzer general had personally marched with his infantry to share their hardships); his handful of surviving tanks were practically out of fuel.

-- Some German troops had even reached the very outskirts of Moscow; just kilometers away, they could make out the gleaming spires of Moscow's Russian orthodox churches, or observe the aerial battles high above the city, as German Heinkel bombers sought – albeit w/ very little success – to pulverize the city into submission. (**Anecdote:** Involving a German veteran with whom I corresponded. His is a fascinating story: He was a soldier in artillery unit w/ **11 PD**; in early Dec 41, his howitzers were close enough to actually lob shells into the city, which they did! Many decades later, he visited Moscow and took a commercial tour through the city; the tour guide indicated that, during the desperate battles of later 1941, the city had actually been shelled by German artillery; he did not speak up to let them know he had done it!)

Soviet Counteroffensive (Dec 41 – Mar 42)

-- By Dec 41, the German attack had pushed well beyond what Clausewitz referred to as its “culmination point” – that perilous point where the strength of the exhausted attacker is actually less than that which can be mustered by the defender.

-- Beginning on **5 December 1941**, and coinciding with a massive plunge in the temperature to more than **-30** Centigrade, the Russians launched a major counteroffensive against Army Group Center, a move which took the Germans by complete surprise! The Red Army counteroffensive took place against the backdrop of what was perhaps the *coldest winter in some 200 years!*

-- Thousands of soldiers would perish in the cold or suffer from debilitating frostbite. Along with man, beast also suffered: Army Group Center lost an average of **1000** horses a day during that terrible winter!

-- It took Hitler and his High Command a week or so to realize scope and significance of Soviet counteroffensive and to begin to implement countermeasures, principally providing whatever reinforcements they could from Germany and Western Europe. Due to the almost *total breakdown of*

German logistics, these new troops arrived at the front, for most part, in “dribs and drabs.”

-- Just a few days later, On **11 Dec 41**, Hitler declared war on the United States. In my view, this was not the horribly disastrous decision some historians have called it; in fact, it was actually an inevitable decision – for as Hitler was all too aware, America had been secretly at war w/ Germany in the North Atlantic since about **June 1941**; by being the first to declare war, Hitler sought, in part, to distract the attention of the German people from his dramatic failure in the east, and, as well, to appear to maintain the initiative in the war!

-- Between **5 Dec 41** and early **Feb 42**, the Soviet offensive came within a razor’s edge of annihilating German Army Group Center. As it was, the surviving German formations before Moscow were pushed back about **100-200** kilometers, and would never come so close to the Russian capital again.

-- Yet despite initial success, Stalin’s offensive failed for several reasons; among them, poor operational and tactical control, a paucity of armor and

artillery; reliance on, for most part, poorly trained and led infantry; fanatical resistance of the German defenders, etc.

-- By **March/April 1941**, both sides exhausted and the fighting ebbed dramatically; a time of rebuilding ensued.

-- Combat would not resume again in significant manner until Hitler launched Operation “*Blau*,” his **1942** summer campaign in the south, which, as you all know, would culminate in the disaster of GFM v. Paulus and his 6th Army at Stalingrad.

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IV. Characteristics of Combat in the East in 1941

Let us begin by examining *two prevalent myths* pertaining to the War in the East **1941/45**:

1) Myth #1: Much of the historical literature over the decades has helped to perpetuate the myth of a German “cakewalk” in the opening phase of the campaign. It goes something like this: Massive German blitzkrieg caught an unprepared / ill-equipped enemy completely by surprise; in the weeks and

months during the summer & early fall of 1941, the German armies sliced through European Russia, registering victory upon victory, in the process, surrounding and capturing millions of Soviet troops – as well as annihilating millions more. Then, in **Oct 41**, w/ victory within grasp, the rain and mud came – what the Russians called the *Rasputitsa* - robbing the Germans of their victory as their mechanized armies lurched to a sudden halt before the gates of Moscow.

Now, without question, as we have seen, the German *Ostheer* achieved some mighty impressive successes in opening weeks/months of *Barbarossa*. That duly noted, the reality of the matter was quite different. In fact, Operation *Barbarossa* was a tenacious, bitter and bloody slog for the German invaders from the opening hours of the campaign.

-- How do we know this? Well, try this statistic on for size: Up to **25,000** German soldiers were killed in action in just the first 9 days of the campaign! From that point to end of war, German forces on the eastern front lost about a regiment of troops on average each day!⁶ Moreover, the diaries of

⁶ **Note:** This data gleaned from recent ground-breaking study by Rudiger Overmann, who was the first to do a thorough statistical analysis of casualty data from a rather obscure German agency.

German soldiers and field post letters too numerous to mention – from field marshals down to simple privates – make abundantly clear that war w/ Russia – its almost preternaturally savage nature – was unlike any which had preceded it.

-- The Germans were often shocked, even outraged, by Soviet conduct at the front – you see, they simply didn't fight fair! – *hinterlistig* (deceitful, perfidious). For example, they would often recede into the forests, or the endless fields of corn & sunflowers, then try to “pick off” isolated German troops; Soviet soldiers would feign surrender, only to shoot down, or toss a grenade, at their approaching German captors. As a result, the *Rotarmisten*, or Red Army soldier, rapidly became something of an “object of fear” to the average German *Landser*. Anecdote from soldier in **6 ID**:

In the evening we were to prepare to continue the march. A messenger brought us the news that a motorcycle messenger from the 14th Company, who had sat by a rye field in a roadside ditch to spread a slice of bread, had been killed from behind by a Russian with the butt of his rifle. This happened only a few hundred meters from our resting spot, on the busy main route of

advance. Caution was ordered and we were forbidden to go anywhere alone. For the high cornfields and the many forests offered the Russian stragglers protection right up to the edge of the vehicles and the roads.

We didn't get far on this evening. . . We bedded down in a clover field beneath a few trees. When the security detachments had taken up their positions, we lay down to sleep, one pressed up against the other, so that we didn't need to unpack as many blankets. At midnight – I was just standing guard – a bloodcurdling, gurgling cry rang out through the silence, emanating from the middle of our sleeping comrades. We rushed over in the belief that Ivan already had one of them by the throat. But everyone was sleeping peacefully, except for a few, who had been wakened by the cry and were staring at us questioningly. Somebody must have just had a not particularly nice dream. And that could only have come from the message [about the motorcycle messenger from the 14th Company]. So we knew that the devious warfare of the Russian stragglers lay heavy on all our minds.

-- Few experiences rattled the German soldier more – or contributed more to his perception of the Soviet Union and its people as profoundly alien – than being forced into battle with female Red Army soldiers – a prospect which clearly collided with the more conventional (*bourgeois*) sensibilities of the average *Landser*. In the fighting around Velikie Luki in July 1941, **Combat Engineer Battalion 253 (253 ID)** was forced to resort to flamethrowers to break the plucky resistance of a Red Army unit composed of women, as depicted by the following eyewitness account:

Because they had again shot from ambush, these women were mown down with flamethrowers. They had jumped back into their trenches and so the whole operation was halted, and the engineers came forward with flamethrowers and forced the women out. They came out with burning hair, burning clothes. I saw that, of course, witnessed it. . . And these women, I think very few of them got out of there in one piece.

In this context, I'd like to note another incident, this one from the winter of 1941: A German combat unit was suddenly attacked by waves of Soviet

infantry, which, as was most often the case in such attacks, were shot down in droves by the German heavy M.G.s. After repulsing the futile attack, the Germans discovered to their horror that all the Russian dead were women.

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2) Myth #2: The genesis of a second – and related – myth actually reaches back, ironically enough, to the publication of the memoirs of some of Hitler’s eastern generals beginning in the **1950s** – Manstein, Guderian, Manteuffel, etc. To wit: Soviet “strategy” in the opening weeks was largely reactive, even incoherent, and based on trading space for time. Truth of the matter is quite different: Beginning by mid-July, and continuing through early September 1941, the Soviet High Command (Stavka) unleashed a series of coordinated counterattacks all along the front line (focused, however, on central front); that these attacks signified a strategically coordinated counter-offensive was not fully appreciated by historians for decades! – which might not be surprising, given the lack of access to Soviet source materials, and the fact that even German generals like Guderian failed at the time to recognize the overarching design behind the Soviet countermoves. The Red Army offensives, however, were poorly executed and conducted mainly by poorly trained and equipped troops; but even these

poorly executed attacks managed to slow and, more significantly, inexorably wear down the German *Ostheer*! Indeed, the Russian strategic objective (at least at the start of the campaign) was to stop the German advance in its tracks – not to trade space for time! – then to rapidly carry the war into German-held territory. Hence, at the outset at least, the Russians had made absolutely no provisions for fighting a war w/ Germany on Russian territory – we know this, in part, from fact that Russian formations along the frontier had been given maps of East Prussia and German-held Poland, not maps of Soviet territory.

* * * *

Up to this point in my talk, I've tossed about a lot of rather daunting albeit totally impersonal statistics – so many dead here, so many captured there, and so forth. But at this point, I'd like to look behind those statistics and ask a simple – but most often neglected question - ***How did soldiers actually die on the field of battle?***

-- To answer this question, I'll quote at length from a recent and insightful study by Dr Karlheinz Schneider-Janessen:

If, in this book, the war between Germany and Russia is described from the point of view of the physician, then that is why all those soldiers who had died on the battlefield itself remain outside its scope – in other words, those who were, as a rule, buried without a physician ever seeing them again. . . . Many laypersons imagine that their death came within only a few seconds. However, that was usually not the case. . . .

In cases of bullet wounds to the throat, which damaged large blood vessels, the soldiers bled to death more or less quickly either externally or else internally into the windpipe. They then drowned, in the truest sense of the phrase, in their own blood. . . .

In cases of injuries to the chest or stomach, which led to the death of the soldier while still on the battlefield, the wounded soldier usually bled to death, either relatively quickly in less than one minute or else took many hours. Victims of chest injuries suffocated, if the injury was such that both lungs had collapsed.

Time and again, soldiers died on the battlefield from injury to a large artery in the arm or leg when there was no help at hand who might bind up the limb. . . Based on observations from the First World War, estimates in the Second World War were that close to half of all soldiers [who died on the battlefield] bled to death. The soldiers who bled to death were then “white as a corpse.” The anatomy of the stomach cavity especially is constructed in such a way that even damage to relatively small blood vessels can lead to death by exsanguination. This may well be the reason that limb shots are at the top of war medicine statistics: not because they were more common, but because soldiers wounded in this way on the battlefield survived more frequently. . .

The most rapid death was from a severe headshot wound, and it was – it is tempting to say: Thank God! – one of the commonest causes of death among soldiers who died on the battlefield itself. Severe injuries to the brain as good as always resulted in immediate loss of consciousness, even when death did not occur directly. . . According to statistics from 1944, 43 percent

of soldiers who died on the battlefield received headshots, followed by 22 percent with chest shots. 15 percent were from direct hits by shells, that is to say, these soldiers' bodies were either partially torn apart or were covered in shrapnel perforations. Only in fourth place, with 8 percent, were stomach shots. Arm and leg injuries together did not even amount to 4 percent of soldier deaths directly on the battlefield.

Dr Schneider-Janessen goes on to quote from an account by a *Wehrmacht* doctor, somewhere in Russia, recalling the dreadful impact of a sudden and deadly artillery barrage on a German marching column. While the time and place are not given, the experience was terrifyingly universal:⁷

Scream after scream, howling, whimpering, groaning. Again and again, renewed salvos, and again and again, renewed screams, a satanic litany! And the sun shined high above the dust, smoke, putrefaction, and death, and sent its tolerant light earthward. Soon there were more prone than upright. The few who could still lift themselves up, staggered on. Go on through!

⁷ **Note:** Describe reaction of editorial staff at CMC when I suggested they use this quote for their alumni magazine article on me and my book!

On through! they cried. I took an outstretched arm as the starting post for my work. The hand was missing. It lay by the side, in the dirt, connected to the arm by only a few bloody threads. Two pointed, jagged bones protruded from the bloody mess. Shreds of skin and fleshy rags hung round it like brightly colored laundry. Showers of iron and dirt repeatedly rained down. The deafening noise once again reached a crescendo. Wailing was all around, in a dreadful many-voiced choir. Earth and mud dashed against the open wounds. I crawled toward the next prone body. He lay face down in the earth; a white mess of brains had sprayed across his tunic. He had mercifully lost consciousness; his breathing was like a clogged motor, jerky and gurgling. His death throes made his limbs tense and twitch. Then that great calm came over him.

Through the force of the next detonations, I lost consciousness for a few moments. All at once, everything was dark and indistinct. I looked down at my limbs. They were still intact; my head was still on top. And as long as this was the case, the grim torment had to go on. The next victim had red foam at his

lips. His chest heaving, he screamed and gurgled, and struggled for a mouthful of air. Big, bloody air bubbles spluttered up between his teeth and burst over his chin. I tore open his uniform and saw a grisly crater in his chest. The unfortunate man lay there with pleading eyes wide open, yellow face, half mad with torment. A fountain of blood shot out of this flesh crater with every draw of breath and sprayed, foaming, on the grass. A choking fear of death gripped his fluttering young heart. Only the morphine somewhat soothed the poor boy's convulsions of fear. Hour after hour passed by like this. . . .

When the shelling and screams had finally grown silent, only groaning, whimpering, cursing, praying, protests and invectives could be heard, along with the death rattles of the dying. They lay everywhere, among the meadows and sunflower fields – the dead and those who did not yet know whether they, too, were to die. A swarm of low-flying aircraft swept past and freed a few from this uncertainty.

-- Throughout Russo-German war, both German and Soviet leadership placed demands upon their soldiers which would be considered criminal by

the standards of any “post-modern” contemporary western army: For example, German infantry, in summer of 1941, was often forced to march from sunrise to sunset, against a blistering sun, for days on end, w/ heavy packs, w/ little water, for hundreds of kilometers, to catch up with the panzer and motorized forces along the forward edge of battle; units remained in the line for weeks/months on end, without rest or relief. Conversely, Russian infantry were often thrown into battle in human waves against the German MGs and heavy weapons, sustaining monstrous losses, while Soviet commissars stood behind advancing Red Army troops, ready to shoot them down if they dared to fall back!

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V. Keine Kameraden – War Crimes (German / Russian)

-- At its core, the War in the East was one of uncompromising brutality between two imperialistic, authoritarian states. As a professional historian, I rarely view any major historical occurrence as “inevitable.” Yet if any war was truly “inevitable,” it was this one, between Nazi Germany and Stalin’s Russia! And in this war men did terrible things to other men (and women,

and children), for the past, like the present is, as one author opined, “shaped by flawed, flesh-and-blood individuals” – individuals who, while in most cases not inherently evil are, under certain circumstances, capable of committing unspeakable acts in the service of a cause or a mission they perceive as just.

-- War crimes were committed by both sides from the opening hours of the campaign. For my account of crimes committed by the Red Army against German soldiers, I used an obscure and almost never used – yet very much available! – source: the *Wehrmacht* War Crimes Bureau (*Wehrmacht-Untersuchungsstelle*). This bureau was the continuation of a similar agency in Prussia during WWI; a careful analysis of its work has underscored that the credibility of this agency was unimpeachable (not one of Propaganda Minister Goebbels propaganda outfits! The head of the War Crimes Bureau was even an anti-Nazi!). In tens of thousands of pages, the agency catalogued in painstaking detail thousands of war crimes committed by the Red Army against German soldiers.

Basic Categories of German & Russian War Crimes:

a) ***Murder/mutilation of prisoners of war***: From the opening hours of the campaign both sides often summarily executed captured enemy soldiers; The German War Crimes Bureau just noted catalogued hundreds of incidents where captured German soldiers were horrifically mutilated and killed after their capture. Of course, no quarter was given by either side when soldiers of the Waffen-SS were involved.

b) ***Acts of genocide (Einsatzgruppen)***: This topic will be explored in much greater detail during my presentation in Dr Marcuse's class tomorrow. Suffice it here to make a few key points: Shortly prior to the invasion, the Germans set up four *Einsatzgruppen*, or Action Squads, for carrying out "special tasks" in the East. These Action Squads, or Dead Squads, were formed primarily from SS & Police units and, collectively, totaled about 3000 men. Before the war, their mission had been carefully laid out in talks between high-ranking SS and regular Army officials. Simply put, that mission was to advance into Russia on the heels of the invading German armies, round up all putative enemies of the Reich – chief among them, of course, the Jews – force them to dig their own grave pits, and shoot them dead. Initially, at least, in the Baltic States and Ukraine, the local populace sometimes collaborated in these murderous actions by unleashing bloody

pogroms of their own on unsuspecting Jewish victims. The actions of the *Einsatzgruppen* in Russia in the summer/fall of 1941 reflected the growing radicalization of the war in the east; for example, initially these death squads primarily targeted able-bodied Jewish men; hence, their murderous activities were, at first, characterized by a certain selectiveness; by Sep/Oct 41, as the Germans began to realize they had truly tough fight on their hands, the *Einsatzgruppen* began to target women and children as well, at times wiping out the entire Jewish population of selected towns and villages. By early 1942, the death squads had killed roughly one million human beings, the great majority Jews, of course. By early 1942, however, the Final Solution had entered its second, more murderous phase, as the death camps in Eastern Poland – Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka, and others – came on line and rendered the killing process much more efficient by largely mechanizing that process.

c) ***Killing of doctors, nurses, stretcher bearers and others covered by Red Cross Protections:*** Again, both sides were guilty of such criminal acts, yet the Russians, who were not signatories to the 1929 Geneva Conventions, may have been the worse offenders here. (Discuss example of Dr Heinrich Haape on first day of the war!)

d) ***Unauthorized requisitions of food or property from the civilian population*** – according to the laws of war at the time, an invading army had the right to requisition foodstuffs in an occupied land to feed itself; however, the principal of *proportionality* had to be observed; often, it wasn't, and local populations, stripped of their primary sources of nourishment (vegetables, eggs, potatoes, livestock, etc.) were left to suffer the consequences – which was often starvation.

e) ***Scorched earth policies***: These policies were employed by both sides – by the Russian's when they withdrew toward Moscow, Leningrad and the Ukraine; by the Germans as they withdrew from Moscow in the winter of 1941, to cite but two examples.

f) ***Use of proscribed ammunition, such as explosive or dum-dum bullets***: There are many accounts in narratives by German soldiers – and also well documented cases by the German War Crimes Bureau – of Russian soldiers using these frightful types of ammunition, which resulted in horrific wounds to anyone unfortunate enough to be struck by an explosive shell or a dum-dum bullet. In my research, I did not come across examples of German

soldiers responding in kind, which, of course, does not mean it didn't happen.

g) *Forced Evacuations of "Suspicious" Populations* – examples here would include the rounding up of Jews and their collection in Ghettos, such as the large Ghetto set up at Minsk (Belorussia), a policy which for obvious reasons rendered their murder that much easier and more complete. On the Soviet side, during the war, Stalin evacuated millions of "suspicious" populations across the Urals to Siberia and other locations; these included the "Volga Germans" and, in 1944, the Chechens. Hundreds of thousands, even millions, perished on these long treks (often on foot) away from their ancestral homelands.

-- Typical of the attitude of German soldiers toward their Russian adversary are several field post letters of General Gotthard Heinrici (**43 Army Corps**) to his family; these letters lay bare the *grim dialectic of the eastern front*, as the German *Landser* routinely reciprocated the gruesome tactics of their enemy:

23.6.41:

Yesterday, we had a Russian division in front of us, which completely scattered after being surprised. Everywhere in the huge forests, in countless farmsteads, there are lost soldiers who all too often ambush us from behind. The Russian is really conducting an underhanded war. In response, on several occasions our people have really cleaned up, without mercy.

24.6.41:

In general, the Russian seems to be withdrawing with his forces back to the east. But when he is forced to fight, he puts up a very determined fight. He is a much better soldier than the Frenchman. Extraordinarily tough, cunning, and deceitful [*hinterlistig*]. Many losses are caused because our people are shot at from behind. The prisoners which have been taken, hitherto only a few hundred, are all kinds of peoples. Among them [are] people who look more like Chinese than like Russians.

4.7.41:

The war in Russia is enormously bloody [*ungeheuer blutig*]. The enemy has suffered the kind of losses which have not so far been seen anywhere in this war. The Russian soldiers have been

told by their leaders that they would all be shot by us. Instead of giving themselves up, they now ambush and shoot at every German from behind. Of course, that demands tough countermeasures from us. So each party escalates the stakes in turn, with the result that hecatombs of human sacrifice are made. Then there's the complexity of the terrain: everywhere forest, swamp, high cornfields, in which the Russians can hide themselves, in short, it really isn't nice here.

6.7.41:

Our Russian who had been in front of us is now destroyed. The affair was incredibly bloody. In part no quarter was given. The Russian behaved with bestiality [*viehisch*] toward our wounded. So then our people struck down and shot dead everything running around in a brown uniform. But there are still large areas of forest full of stragglers and refugees – some with, some without weapons – which are a very great danger. You can send whole divisions through there and still tens of thousands will escape capture in these impenetrable areas.

-- German crimes against both soldiers and civilians fueled the rise of a Resistance Movement throughout occupied Russia – a movement which would grow exponentially after **1941**, gradually tying down more and more German divisions desperately needed at the forward edge of battle! This partisan warfare was characterized by an uncompromising, almost preternatural barbarism, as the following anecdote from summer of 1941 illustrates:

One German soldier in the Mogilev region recalled how a rumor reached them of hidden gold at a nearby state farm. With some comrades, the soldiers went to the farm and tore the place to pieces looking for gold. The head of the settlement begged them to wait as he could get the gold in 24 hours and if the buildings were all destroyed, the peasants would have nowhere to spend the winter. At dusk the Germans left with the orders that the gold was to be produced the following day or the entire population of the farm would be placed under arrest. A detachment of four men was left behind, commanded by a soldier called Fisher. The next day there was no word from Fisher on the radio, and so a detachment returned to the farm in

armored cars. They found the barn burned to the ground with only one building remaining. In it stood a very heavy leather box, *Gelb* (Gold) scrawled on it in white paint. On opening it, the Germans found the heads of Fisher and the three other German soldiers left behind.

-- In their interactions w/ the local Russian populace, the Germans were guilty of many horrible blunders. And one of these may well have been fatal – that was the German decision of **Sep 41** *not to disband the collective farms* and return land to the peasants. Had they done so, it may well have been the one, sure fire way to gain the allegiance of the Russian peasantry in German-occupied Russia, but it was not to be, for Hitler's only objective – as he clearly stated during an infamous policy meeting in mid-**Jul 41** – was to “divvy up” the giant “cake” that was the Soviet Union, so as first to “rule” it, secondly to “administer” it and thirdly to “exploit” it – a cynical attitude more akin to 19th Century imperialism than to modern European warfare, and a policy that played directly into the hands of the Soviet Resistance Movement.

-- Final point: There is, in my view, a serious *asymmetry* in the *relative* weight of attention given by historians to German and Soviet war crimes. Simply put, the focus has been largely on crimes committed by the *Wehrmacht* in Russia, not those of the Red Army. Moreover, the debate in Germany has lurched palpably to the political Left since the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the Reunification of Germany a generation ago. In fact, in recent years, condemning *writ large* the **10,000,000** soldiers of the *Ostheer* who fought inside Russia from **1941/44** for war crimes has become something of an obsession among the historians' guild in Germany. By illustrating this point, I am in no way attempting to whitewash the very real crimes committed by too many German soldiers in Russia; I am only trying to point out that it unfair (and, more significantly, historically inaccurate) to brand the average German soldier who fought in Russia as a common war criminal.

At the same time, the very real, and horrific, war crimes committed by the Red Army are often largely overlooked. Example: The so-called fortress city of Bobruisk, on the Berezina, in **June 1944**, and the slaughter of some **5000** wounded German soldiers in military hospitals by *regular* Red Army troops).

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VI. Why did Barbarossa fail?

-- Hopefully, I've been able to provide you with a good introduction to Operation Barbarossa – now I'd like to try to answer the question: “Why did Hitler's most massive undertaking fail?”

-- First and foremost, as English historian Paul Johnson has pointed out, *Barbarossa* was fatally “underpowered.” In terms of resources committed by the German invaders, there was simply not enough of anything – not enough men, guns, tanks, vehicles, horses, etc. This recalls what Shelby Foote, the great chronicler of our Civil War, once said about why the South lost the war: In Foote's analysis, the Confederacy's defeat was almost *fore-ordained*; as he put it, “*You just can't whip 23,000,000 people with 9,000,000—especially when nearly half of the latter number are slaves.*” In a similar vein, in a Total War setting, some **70,000,000** Germans were simply too few to destroy **190,000,000** Russians.

Moreover, after start of *Barbarossa*, Hitler *starved his eastern armies* of most all new equipment and new units! In the fantasy world of the Fuehrer's Wolf's Lair HQ, nestled deep in the dark forests of East Prussia, the new

tanks, APCs, airplanes, and so forth, were being held back for wildly ambitious post-*Barbarossa* tasks!

-- Yet we must also consider the grave logistical shortcomings of Operation Barbarossa (a huge yet often neglected issue!). Simply stated, German logistical planning & resources had an effective range of about **500** km – to the Dvina/Dnepr river lines; after that all had to be improvised. Moreover, with every kilometer farther east that Hitler's armies advanced, the Russian railroads increased in significance; yet here, too, German assumptions prove false! Simply stated, the few available tracks leading toward Moscow were never able to provide the requisite tonnage of fuel, ammunition and foodstuffs. In the fall/winter of 1941/42, the German logistical system in the east approached a point of complete collapse.

-- Thirdly, there was the doggedly tenacious Russian resistance – by today's standards veritably incomprehensible! – coupled w/ the amazing output of the Soviet system of military mobilization. In fact, this mobilization system, cumbersome and awkward though it was, produced some **50** new armies from June-Dec 41! And while these armies were, generally speaking, not as

well trained or equipped as the pre-war armies, they still wore down and inexorably attrited the German invaders.

-- Finally, we must point a sure finger of blame at the German military culture of arrogance, racism and hubris! As difficult as it may be to comprehend today, Hitler and his leading generals, for the most part, simply did not take their adversary seriously! (Note: Point to roll of Fall of France in this arrogance/hubris!)

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VII. Outcome & Significance of Operation *Barbarossa*

-- After nearly two years of war, the German *blitzkrieg* was finally blunted for first time at the gates of Moscow. The *Wehrmacht's* aura of invincibility was no more. Of course, the war was far from over, and would continue for another 3½ years; which brings up the obvious question of just where does the failure of *Barbarossa* fit into the overall mosaic of World War II and the ultimate German catastrophe?

-- Was *Barbarossa* the turning point or a turning point of World War II? As many of you are no doubt aware, many historians view the German cataclysm at Stalingrad in late 1942 as the turning point of the war – and, at

least from the *psychological impact* it had on the German people, it clearly was the turning point. Others, in contrast, have pointed to the huge tank battle of Kursk in the summer of 1943; however, the significance of Kursk has, in my view, been greatly exaggerated, and new research has revealed that, from a tactical standpoint, the Germans actually won the battle, while their tank losses were relatively minor – thus Kursk was not the terrible “death ride” of the panzer divisions, as some have characterized it.

-- So what about *Barbarossa*? Without question, the failure of Operation *Barbarossa* threw all of Hitler’s plans of conquest into a quandary. Now he was compelled to undergo at least another summer of bloodletting in the east, instead of being able to turn all of his – and Germany’s – energies against the growing threat posed by Anglo-American air and naval power. In fact, the downward spiral of Germany’s overall military & political situation by December 1941, and following America’s entry into the war, was dramatic and, in my view, irreversible.

-- ***German Army never completely recovered from its losses in Operation Barbarossa*** - over **300,000** dead by end of 1941, and roughly one million casualties all told. Army Group Center would never again acquire the

strength it had in 1941; in 1942, its infantry divisions, and those of Army Group North, were mostly reduced in size from 9 to just 6 infantry battalions. Only Army Group South was brought back to something approaching full strength.

-- The German summer campaign of **1942** – aimed at Stalingrad and the oil in the Caucasus region – would be much more modest in scope (a reflection of the German Reich’s attenuated resources). Yet even in this significantly more localized campaign, the attacking German forces were soon perilously overstretched. And we all know the outcome.

-- In conclusion, I’d like to quote from the final passages of my new book, *“Barbarossa Unleashed:”*

“To bring our story full circle it was, in the final analysis, the dutiful German soldier – the *Landser* of the Russian front – who suffered, and died, because of the inability of Adolf Hitler and his military leadership to conceive the limits of their own mortality. “Wise commanders,” avers scholar Frederick W. Kagan, “design plans that can be executed by ordinary soldiers.

They know that if they expect every soldier to be a hero and every commander a genius, they will inevitably be disappointed. Wars are never neat. The unexpected happens. The enemy gets a vote in determining how things go. Sound planning therefore builds in a margin of error: attacking with more force than necessary; maintaining large reserves; expecting greater friction; and preparing for stronger enemy resistance.

Kagan was addressing, quite critically, U.S. military policy in 2006. Yet his words encapsulate the fatal errors of Adolf Hitler and the German General Staff in their abortive *Barbarossa* adventure in the summer of 1941; as such, they stand as a fitting epitaph for its outcome.”

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