Rejecting Catastrophe: the German High Command and the Failure of the Offensive in the Soviet Union, Autumn 1941

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On August 11, 1941, Generaloberst Franz Halder, Chief of the German General Staff, recorded his impression of the campaign in the Soviet Union so far:

> The whole situation makes it increasingly plain that we have underestimated the Russian colossus, which consistently prepared for war with that utterly ruthless determination so characteristic of totalitarian states. . . . At the outset of the war, we reckoned with about 200 enemy divisions. Now we have already counted 360. Indeed these new divisions are not armed and equipped according to our standards, and their tactical leadership is often poor. But they are there, and if we smash a dozen of them, the Russians simply put up another dozen.[1]

Here, just seven weeks after the Wehrmacht launched its invasion of the USSR, and five weeks after he had pronounced the campaign essentially won, Halder began to show the first signs of doubt in the course of the fight. He refused to give in to such thoughts, however, and instead clung to the belief that innate German superiority and the Wehrmacht's professionalism would win through in the struggle against a militarily inept, subhuman Communist foe. Like his colleagues in the German high command, he apparently never questioned his fundamental attitudes and assumptions, even after the campaign's extension into 1942 became unavoidable.[2]

In order to understand the German military leaders' reaction to the prolongation of the war with the Soviet Union, we must first examine German intentions and expectations at the start, which displayed a mix of military hubris and racist arrogance. At the strategic level, Adolf Hitler was making the decisions, but his generals were in broad agreement with him. Most of them saw the USSR as a long-term existential threat, a "Judeo-Bolshevik" regime that was fundamentally opposed to Nazi Germany's "Aryan" racial state. At the same time, they believed that the Soviet regime was fundamentally weak, a collossus with feet of clay, riven by internal divisions, essentially a mob of primitive, subhuman Slavs, *Untermenschen*,

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1 Franz Halder, *Kriegstagebuch. Tägliche Aufzeichnungen des Chefs des Generalstabes des Heeres 1939-1942*, ed. Arbeitskreis für Wehrforschung, Stuttgart (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1962), 3:170. Transl. Geoffrey Megargee. Hereafter, Halder KTB.

2 In this paper, the term "high command" refers to Adolf Hitler and key elements and personalities within the Armed Forces High Command (*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*, OKW), especially the Armed Forces Command Staff (*Wehrmachtführungsstab*) and the Army High Command (*Oberkommando des Heeres*, OKH), especially the Army General Staff (*Generalstab des Heeres*). The high commands of the navy and air force played subordinate roles in this drama. One should also note that the OKH exercised complete operational control of the eastern front, while the OKW took control of the other theaters of war as an ad hoc operational headquarters. See Geoffrey P. Megargee, *Inside Hitler's High Command* (Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 2000).

led by clever but ultimately inferior Jews. One good blow, the generals thought, would bring the entire rotten structure crashing down. That blow would come about with the destruction of the Soviet armies west of the Dnieper and Dvina rivers. The Wehrmacht's intelligence estimates indicated that the Soviets did not have the strategic reserves they would need to replace those armies, and so, with the Red Army defeated and the government in a state of chaotic impotence, the rest of the campaign would simply be a matter of occupying as much of the USSR as the Germans believed they needed in order to satisfy their resource needs and prevent the Soviets from rebuilding their state.

The operational plan involved three axes of advance, with Leningrad, Moscow, and the Donets basin in Ukraine being the initial goals. The key to operational success would be for the Wehrmacht's armored and motorized divisions to advance rapidly, breaking through the Soviet defenses and dislocating, surrounding, and destroying the Soviet armies before they could retreat into the interior and prolong the campaign indefinitely. The German generals did not expect the mission to present them with great difficulties. The Red Army, they believed, was incapable of carrying out modern mobile warfare, and so would be unable to either counterattack or execute a fighting withdrawal. They knew that Soviet Premier Josef Stalin had dismissed, incarcerated or killed tens of thousands of his senior officers in the purges of the previous few years, and most of those remaining were political hacks rather than military experts. In the invasion of Poland in 1939, and again in the initial attack on Finland in 1940, the Red Army had proven itself singularly unprofessional (although the Germans did manage to disregard the facility with which Soviet officers learned from their mistakes and went on to defeat the Finns). The Germans could also look back on their campaign in France, in which they defeated the strongest army on the Continent in a matter of weeks and drove the British back to their island. All of these considerations led the generals to believe the campaign would be easy: they estimated that it would be over in eleven to fourteen weeks, including a three week replenishment phase in the middle.

With the benefit of hindsight, we can see the flaws in the German plan. First of all, and most important, its central strategic assumption, that the Soviet regime would collapse after an initial military defeat, was questionable. Granted, the full power and resiliency of a totalitarian system had not been tested in the context of all-out war, but one can ask why officers who served the Nazi regime would assume such weakness on the part of the Stalin's state. The Germans' racist attitudes appear to provide the only explanation. As for their assumptions concerning the conduct of the campaign, one can infer that a heavy dose of "victory disease" was at work, together with serious problems in the intelligence function. The Germans grossly underestimated the Soviets' military capabilities. True, the Red Army was not the Wehrmacht's equal, qualitatively, but its size and dispositions were going to cause problems. The Germans believed that the Red Army numbered 2 million men. The true number by the start of the invasion on 22 June was already over 5 million. Moreover, the Germans *overestimated* the

number of Red Army units in the western military districts by 30 to 50 percent.[3] Thus, the Wehrmacht would be unable to catch and defeat the bulk of the Red Army near the frontier. A decisive military victory in the lands west of Moscow was anything but certain.

The Wehrmacht also faced daunting logistical and personnel challenges. The invading force would number 3 million Germans (plus half a million allies), 600,000 vehicles, and 625,000 horses. Their objectives lay between 1,000 and 1,500 km from their start lines. Soviet roads were grossly inadequate, and their railroads ran on a different gauge. The Germans relied on expedient measures, mostly involving trucks, to overcome the difficulties. Furthermore, supplies of men, equipment, and munitions were barely sufficient for the short campaign that the generals so confidently forecast. The Wehrmacht was running the campaign on a shoestring. If the Germans did not achieve their goals within their stated time frame, they were going to be in deep trouble.[4]

One further element of German planning requires attention. On 30 March 1941, Hitler addressed the principal commanders and staff officers for Operation *Barbarossa*. This would be a war of extermination, he said, a race war. The usual rules would not apply. Soviet soldiers were not to be treated as comrades. Bolshevik commissars and intelligentsia were to be eliminated. Hitler was calling on his military leaders to violate the norms and international laws of war, but in no contemporary source is there a hint of resistance on their part.[5] In fact, the army's Commander in Chief, Generalfeldmarschall Walther von Brauchitsch, had already told the senior commanders on 27 March that the troops "have to realize that this struggle is being waged by one race against another, and proceed with the necessary harshness."[6]

Von Brauchitsch's message demonstrates that the military, the SS, and other Reich authorities shared many of the same goals and values, which shaped their plans for the war behind the lines. The army obviously wanted to win the campaign as rapidly as possible. It also wanted to control the vast territories it was going to conquer, in order to allow for the free movement of troops and supplies, and to extract resources, especially food, since it knew its logistical apparatus could not bring enough forward. The army and the Reich Food Ministry

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3 David Thomas, "Foreign Armies East and German Military Intelligence in Russia, 1941-1945," *Journal of Contemporary History* 22 (1987), 277-278; David M. Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus: The Red Army on the Eve of World War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 9-11; Glantz, *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 33. The magnitude of these miscalculations grew out of systemic problems within the German staff structure, as well as the difficulty of gathering intelligence in the Soviet Union.

4 Along with the aforementioned sources, see Martin van Creveld, *Supplying War: Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), chap. 7, and Richard L. DiNardo, *Mechanized Juggernaut or Military Anachronism? Horses and the German Army of WWII* (Mechanicsburg, Penn.: Stackpole, 1991), chap. 3. The figures for German strength come from Germany, Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, *Germany and the Second World War* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1990-2006), 4:318.

5 The most detailed analysis of the attitudes of the German army group and army commanders, only available in German, is in Johannes Hürter, *Hitlers Heerführer. Die deutschen Oberbefehlshaber im Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion 1941/42* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2007). Their part in the meeting is discussed on pp 9-12. On the 30 March 1941 meeting, see Halder KTB, 2:335-337. Readers should be aware that Halder edited his diary heavily after the war.

6 Jürgen Förster, "Operation Barbarossa as a War of Conquest and Annihilation," in *Germany and the Second World War*, 4:485.

also wanted food to go to German civilians, to prevent the kind of hardships that had sapped morale during World War I. A so-called Economic Staff East would handle broader efforts at expropriation, while the SS planned for the territories' colonization by Germans. All of these actors shared the desire to destroy Jews and Communists, along with an utter disregard for the lives of the other peoples who populated the east. So-called military necessity meshed perfectly with ideological imperatives and deep-rooted prejudices, such that even military men who did not see themselves as Nazis could work toward the Party's goals.[7] The Germans' plans would have dire consequences for everyone living in the conquered territories. Ultimately, they would also have serious strategic consequences for the Germans themselves.

Operation *Barbarossa* began on 22 June, and the first few weeks of operations seemed to progress much as the Germans wished. They established air supremacy almost from the start, and their ground forces quickly penetrated deep into the Soviet rear, especially in the northern and central sectors. The Soviets fought hard, launching counterattacks whenever and wherever they could, but their efforts were disjointed and weak, and the Germans brushed most of them aside without difficulty. In the central sector alone, the Germans killed or captured more than 400,000 Red Army soldiers, and destroyed or captured thousands of tanks and artillery pieces by 1 July. On 3 July, Halder wrote in his diary,

> On the whole, then, one can say that the task of shattering the bulk of the Russian army this side of the Dvina and the Dnieper [rivers] has been accomplished.... I do not doubt ... that east of the Dvina and Dnieper we will encounter nothing more than partial forces.... It is thus probably no overstatement to say that the campaign against Russia has been won inside of fourteen days. Naturally it is not yet ended. The breadth of the space and the stubbornness of the resistence, which is being conducted with all means, will keep us occupied for many weeks yet.[8]

On the same day, Generalleutnant Friedrich Paulus, later of Stalingrad infamy but now Halder's deputy, issued a memorandum to the branches of the General Staff in which he laid the groundwork for operations to follow *Barbarossa*.[9] Hitler said on 4 July that "practically speaking, he—the Russian—has lost the war," and he put von Brauchitsch and the head of the OKW's Armed Forces Command Staff, Generalmajor Alfred Jodl, to work planning the form that the army would take after the conclusion of the campaign.[10] On 23 July, Halder predicted that, in another month, the army would be in Leningrad and Moscow, at the beginning of October on the Volga River, and one month after that in Baku and Batum, in the Caucasus oil region.[11]

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7 For more detail on the development of German occupation policy, see Förster, "Operation Barbarossa as a War of Conquest and Annihilation."

8 Halder KTB, 3:38-39.

9 Oberquartiermeister I des Generalstabes des Heeres Nr. 430/41 g.Kdos. Chefs., 3.7.41: Vorbereitung der Operationen für die Zeit nach Barbarossa, in BArch RH2/1520, 217.

10 Walter Warlimont, *Im Hauptquartier der deutschen Wehrmacht 1939-1945: Grundlagen, Formen, Gestalten* (Frankfurt am Main: Bernard & Graefe, 1962), 194-95.

11 Halder KTB, 3:170.

That is not to say, however, that all was going well for the Germans, and Halder's complacency is difficult to understand. The mass of the army, which moved on foot, was not keeping up with the relatively small mobile spearheads. The transport situation was proving worse than expected; the number of functional transport vehicles dropped by 25 to 30 percent in the first month alone. Horses were wearing out too, and not enough replacements were available. By late July, the armies were beginning to complain of shortages of fuel and ammunition, and personnel losses were also more serious than the planners had anticipated; by August 3, Halder recorded total casualties of 179,500.[12] At that rate, the Wehrmacht would use up its replacements in short order. The situation would have been worrisome to anyone who was not convinced of the Soviet Union's impending military and political demise. The uncomfortable truth, however, was that no such demise was in the offing. The Germans had reached the point in the campaign when they expected serious fighting to come to an end, but the Soviets refused to give up, and they were performing miracles of mobilization and reorganization. By 1 July, they had called up an astounding 5.3 million additional men. By 1 August, they had formed 17 new field armies, with 144 new divisions: their strength stood at 401 divisions, despite having lost 46 since 22 June.[13]

August was the point at which the first doubts become noticeable within the musings of the high command, but they would remain unclear and contradictory. We have already seen Halder's statement of 11 August, in which he noted the Soviets' ability to come up with a seemingly endless supply of new units, but that momentary expression of unease was not to be characteristic of his attitude. Others, meanwhile, were becoming less sanguine. Within the OKW, on 6 August, Oberst Walter Warlimont, Jodl's deputy, produced "A Brief Strategic Overview on the Continuation of the War After the Campaign in the East." In it, he wrote that the German military leadership would have to reckon with the fact that the Wehrmacht would not reach its operational goals—a line from the Caucasus oil region to the Volga and on to Archangel and Murmansk—in 1941, and so an open front would remain in existence.[14] That document became the basis for a broader strategic assessment that Hitler approved, dated 1 September, which began by saying that, "Should—as the high command has always calculated [!]—the campaign in the east in the year 1941 does not lead to the complete destruction of Soviet Russia's power of resistance…" and went on to identify the defeat of the USSR as the top priority for 1942.[15] So, the highest strategic authority was accepting, at a minimum, the possibility that Germany might not defeat the Soviet Union in one campaigning season. Halder was far from agreeing with that assessment, however, and the field commanders also seemed to still believe that they could knock the USSR out before the end of the year.

By early August, the German high command also finally had to deal with a conflict

12 Halder KTB, 3:145.

13 Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus*, 15. See also Glantz, *Colossus Reborn: The Red Army at War, 1941-1943* (Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 2005).

14 Landesverteidigung-Chef Nr. 441339/41 g.K.Ch., 6.8.1941: Kurzer strategischer Überblick über die Fortführung des Krieges nach dem Ostfeldzug, in BArch RM 7/258, 6.

15 "Die strategische Lage im Spätsommer 1941 als Grundlage für die weiteren politischen und militärischen Absichten." Doc. 265. Germany, Auswärtigen Amt, *Akten zur deutschen auswärtigen Politik 1918-1945*, Serie D, Band XIII.1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970), 346-353.

that had been hanging over it for months, over how to bring the campaign to a conclusion. Halder and the other generals wanted to attack Moscow, in the belief that the Soviets would throw everything they had into the battle to protect the city—and would thus lose it all. Hitler saw more strategic value in capturing Leningrad and Ukraine. Finally, the Führer forced his will upon the generals. The initial result was a stunning victory, as forces from Army Group Center sliced south on 25 August and, within a month, encircled Kiev, capturing over 600,000 Soviet soldiers. A new surge of optimism spread through the German command. Generalmajor Eduard Wagner, the army's Generalquartiermeister, or chief supply officer, commented on 5 October,

> the last great collapse stands immediately before us. . . . Operational goals are being set that earlier would have made our hair stand on end. Eastward of Moscow! Then I estimate that the war will be mostly over, and perhaps there really will be a collapse of the [Soviet] system. . . . I am constantly astounded at the Führer's military judgment. He intervenes in the course of operations, one could say decisively, and up until now he has always acted correctly. The great success in the south is his solution.[16]

With actions on the flanks completed to Hitler's satisfaction, attention now returned to the central axis and Moscow. Planning had begun in early September for a new offensive, Operation *Typhoon*, to encircle Moscow. Both sides appeared powerful on paper, but they were much like two punch-drunk fighters, nearly exhausted, trying to hang on, hoping the other would quit first. The difference was that the Soviets had no choice, and they were also being driven back on their sources of supply. The Germans were extending themselves, bringing up fuel and ammunition instead of the clothing and supplies they would need to deal with the onset of winter.

Initially, Operation *Typhoon* was another stunning victory for the Wehrmacht. The Germans broke through the Soviet lines, advanced up to 200 km, and completed two huge encirclements. The Soviets lost a further million men, including over 685,000 prisoners. A gap 480 km wide now existed in the Soviet line, and nothing seemed to stand between the Germans and Moscow. There seemed no limit to what the Wehrmacht could achieve. Plans were still under consideration to advance through the Caucasus in November, continuing on through Iran into Iraq in 1942, to threaten the British position in the Middle East—an advance of a further 1600 km.[17]

At that moment, however, three things happened. First, the Soviets mobilized 440,000 civilians to dig defenses in front of Moscow, and thousands of men—local militia and internal security troops—to man them. Second, the Germans, with an excess of confidence, began to broaden their front instead of concentrating to take or surround the city. And third, it began to

16 Elizabeth Wagner, ed., *Der Generalquartiermeister: Briefe und Tagebuchaufzeichnungen des Generalquartiermeisters des Heeres, General der Artillerie Eduard Wagner* (Munich: Günter Olzog, 1963), 204.

17 Percy Ernst Schramm, ed., *Kriegstagebuch des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht (Wehrmachtführungsstab)* (hereafter OKW KTB) (Herrsching: Manfred Pawlak, 1982), 1:1038-1040.

rain. This happens every year in Russia, as the Germans should well have known. It is called the fall *rasputitsa*: literally, "the time without roads." For the Soviets, this was a problem, but one they were anticipating. For the Germans, it was a disaster. Supplies could not get through; units could not move; aircraft could not fly. By mid-October, the Wehrmacht was stuck. They would have to wait for the ground to freeze before trying again.

Now the optimism of just two weeks before began to fade. On 24 October, Wagner wrote, "In my opinion, it is not possible to come to the end [of this war] this year; it will still last a while. The how? is still unsolved . . . [the fact] that this war would still be long and hard was already clear at the end of last year."[18] On the same day, Paulus announced to a meeting of General Staff representatives that the attack toward Iraq would have to wait until the following spring.[19] Hitler himself, who edged up toward the conclusion back in August, admitted to von Brauchitsch on 7 November that Germany could no longer hope to reach its farthest objectives, such as Murmansk, the Volga River, and the Caucasus oil fields, in 1941. Indeed, this was a point at which the Germans would have benefited from taking a good hard look at their situation, with an eye toward going over to the defensive. Despite recent German victories, there was no sign that the Soviets were going to give up, or run out of soldiers, any time soon. The strength of the average German infantry division stood at 65 percent; for armored divisions, it was 35 percent. Supplies of every kind were short. Winter was coming. Arguably, the best opportunity to take up a defensive stance had already passed, but such a move still might have made sense, rather than further exhausting the available forces.

Still, no one seemed quite ready to give up entirely. The army's senior leaders were sure that the Soviets had to be on their last legs. The new goal was to strike one more blow that would weaken the Soviets beyond hope of recovery in 1942—and the extent of that blow was going to stretch German resources to their limits. Halder, especially, seems to have lost touch with reality. On 5 November, he told a subordinate that he was trying to achieve a balance between two concepts: conserving strength (*Erhaltungsgedanken*) and seeking maximum effect (*Wirkungsgedanken*). Two days later he sent an announcement to the chiefs of staff of the army groups and armies, informing them that he was planning to hold a conference in about a week in the town of Orsha. In the supporting papers, he included a map with two boundaries on it, to mark the "farthest" and "minimum" advances that he believed the army should try to achieve in the coming weeks. The "minimum" boundary started from a point well east of Leningrad and ran southward, passing Moscow on the east by at least 250 km and continuing to Rostov on the Don River. The "farthest" boundary, which Halder believed had to be the actual goal, extended the advance another 120 to 145 km to the east in the northern and central sectors, and took in Stalingrad and the Maikop oil center in the south. As he told the conferees on 13 November, and his own staff on 23 November:

> It is possible that the war is shifting from the level of military success to the level of moral and economic endurance, without changing the military's mission, that is, to use

18 Wagner, *Generalquartiermeister*, 210.

19 OKW KTB, 1:1072-1073.

> all available means to damage the enemy as severely as possible . . . . The military power of Russia is no longer a danger for the reconstruction of Europe . . . . The enemy . . . is not yet destroyed. We will not achieve his full destruction *in this year*, despite the efforts of our troops, which cannot be recognized enough. What with the endlessness of the territory and its inexhaustible supply of manpower, we definitely cannot reach 100 percent of that goal. Naturally we knew that from the start.[20]

The reaction from his audience must have been a shock and a disappointment to Halder. Everyone, his own staff included, pushed back against the idea. The Soviets were clearly not out of soldiers, while the Wehrmacht's losses totaled nearly seven hundred thousand. Manpower, equipment, munitions, and supplies were all running short. The mud was finally freezing, but the cold was damaging trucks and locomotives, largely cancelling out the improvement in road conditions. The representatives from Army Groups North and South wanted to stop their advances immediately and dig in for the winter; Army Group Center's officers thought they could try for Moscow, but nothing more. Halder relented to an extent, but insisted that everyone continue the attack until mid-December, and that Army Group Center take Moscow. When Oberst Otto Eckstein, the chief supply officer for Army Group Center, pointed out the precariousness of the supply situation, Halder clapped him on the back and replied, "You are certainly right to be anxious, based on your calculations. But we do not want to hold [Army Group Center commander Fedor von] Bock up, if he thinks he can do the thing. Indeed, it takes a little luck, too, to conduct a war!"[21]

In the meantime, on 15 November, the Germans resumed their attack. Again, they made good initial progress along some axes. But the fighting was grinding them down; they were at the end of their strength. By early December, the offensive had stalled. Now they were in a bind. They could no longer advance. They were not holding defensible terrain, nor had they constructed any field fortifications or cold-weather quarters. Construction materials and winter clothing, as well as reserves of fuel and ammunition, sat in depots in Poland, and the means to move them forward were lacking. As the temperatures sank well below freezing and the snow fell, the men had their hands full just trying to survive; any thought of attacking was gone.

If there was one bit of good news for the Wehrmacht, it was that the Soviets were exhausted as well, and in no position to attack. That, at least, was the assessment of German intelligence—but they were wrong. On 24 November, the Soviet high command ordered the deployment of its newest strategic reserve, and many of the new divisions consisted of battle-tested Siberian troops: Stalin had learned that the Japanese did not intend to attack the USSR, so he released forces to join the defense of Moscow. Soviet forces in the west now numbered 343 divisions and 98 separate brigades, totaling over four million men. The best estimate is that the Soviets had lost over 2 million men just since the end of September. Even so, they had

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20 Halder KTB, 3:306 (23 Nov 1941); emphasis in the original. For more on the Orsha conference, see Earl F. Ziemke, "Franz Halder at Orsha: The German General Staff Seeks a Consensus," *Military Affairs*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Dec. 1975), 173-176.

21 Wagner, *Generalquartiermeister*, 289. Eckstein's personal record of the exchange is in the Wagner papers, BArch N 510/27.

fought the Wehrmacht to a standstill at last, and were about to turn the tables.

This is a good point to return to an element of the campaign that had enormous human and strategic significance: the German atrocities in the Soviet Union. There were parts of the Soviet Union in which the local populace welcomed the Germans as liberators from the harsh Stalinist regime. The Germans, however, proved to be even worse. Since they believed that they were going to win the campaign easily, and since, at least officially, they believed the locals were inferior beings whose needs were secondary, they saw no reason to make any concessions. They did try to use some population groups, such as people from the Baltic states or Ukraine, as cats' paws in their plans for the territories, but they never allowed them any serious degree of autonomy, and their survival depended on the Germans' whims. As for Russians, their existence was even more precarious; the Germans saw them solely as a labor force, and even that degree of usefulness did not guarantee that their food, housing, and even winter clothing would not be confiscated. Jews, Communists, suspected partisans and their supporters, and people with disabilities were subject to execution by SS killing squads, police battalions, military police, and regular army troops. Prisoners of war whom the Germans did not shoot as Jews or Communists died in huge numbers anyway, of starvation, exposure, disease, abuse, and exhaustion. Millions of Soviet citizens were dead already by spring 1942. Such brutality was fully in accordance with orders issued to the troops before the campaign began, and all the army group and army headquarters reinforced those orders with new ones in the late fall of 1941.[22] What the Soviets understood as a war of naked aggression at the start soon revealed itself as a war of absolute conquest and genocide. Strategically, this meant that the Nazi-Soviet war would come close to being a "total war," with compromise and leniency all but nonexistent. Nazi ideology and the Wehrmacht's understanding of "military necessity" created a conflict that the Soviets correctly saw as existential.

Two momentous developments occurred in the days after the German offensive stalled. The first was that the Red Army launched a counteroffensive of its own. It had concentrated a force that outnumbered the Germans by two to one in personnel at the chosen points of attack, with a slightly lesser superiority in artillery and near parity in tanks—all without arousing any suspicion.[23] Many of the Soviet units were themselves still very weak from the fighting of the previous weeks, but they pressed the Germans hard, and often succeeded in penetrating far to the rear to attack headquarters and disrupt supply lines. Several days passed before the German high command recognized the seriousness of the situation. Halder's diary reveals no special sense of urgency for several days after the attacks began. On 8 December, Hitler ordered the army to go over to the defensive, and von Brauchitsch followed that up with a more detailed order for the army, stating that Army Group Center would organize itself for

22 Geoffrey P. Megargee, "Vernichtungskrieg: Strategy, Operations, and Genocide in the German Invasion of the Soviet Union, 1941," in the *Acta* of the International Commission on Military History's XXXIV Annual Congress (Commissione Italiana di Storia Militare, 2009).

23 The Soviets quickly established their superiority in the art of deception operations: what they called *maskirovka*. Time and time again, right through the end of the war, they were able to fool the Germans as to their capabilities and intentions. This allowed them to build up massively superior forces at the point of attack and strike with operational surprise.

defensive operations "after the conclusion of the operation against Moscow."[24] One can only wonder what "conclusion" von Brauchitsch had in mind; his orders were out of date before he issued them. Soon reality sank in, but there was little the high command could do. Significant reinforcements would not reach the front for weeks. The senior field commanders, with a distinct note of panic to their messages, proposed pulling back; they worried that the Soviets might surround and destroy the Wehrmacht's forward elements. As Hitler pointed out, however, the armies had not prepared any positions in the rear, and given the extreme shortages of fuel, vehicles, and horses, there was no way to pull the heavy weapons out. He approved a few local withdrawals, but otherwise insisted that the troops hold where they were.[25] The Germans did hang on, if only barely—and arguably in large part because of Hitler's determination.[26] Stalin unintentionally assisted them by issuing an order that broadened the counteroffensive against Army Group Center to include the entire front. The Germans were weak, but not that weak; the Red Army could not destroy them all at once. The Soviet offensive went on for two months, but finally sputtered out in the mud of the spring *rasputitsa*. Though the Wehrmacht had been pushed back, and despite the loss of more than 700,000 men since October, it was still firmly on Soviet soil. In the meantime, Hitler dismissed a number of his generals, including von Brauchitsch on 19 December. He now took command of the army personally, and began preparing its next big effort.[27]

The other major development took place on 11 December, when Hitler declared war on the United States, four days after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. Hitler had believed for years that war with the USA was inevitable.[28] He knew that his navy was too weak to take on the Americans directly, but with Japan in the war, that point seemed moot. Most of the Wehrmacht's leaders believed, like their Führer, that America's entry would make no great difference. (Halder did not even make a note of it in his diary.) So long as Germany could win in the east in 1942, it would have all the resources it would need to hold off the United States and Great Britain indefinitely. That was the gist of a planning document that the OKW issued on 14 December, entitled, "Overview of the Significance of the Entry of the U.S.A. and Japan into the War."[29] It stated that Japan's entry into hostilities had thrown the western Allies' strategic plans out the window, and there was no way they could mount any major

24 OKW KTB 1:1078.

25 On the Soviet counteroffensives, see Glantz, *When Titans Clashed*, 87-94.

26 Debate over Hitler's "stand fast" orders—in 1941 and later—has persisted to the present day. Many former generals, and some historians, have criticized Hitler for his inflexibility and his unwillingness to trust his commanders' judgment. Others have pointed out that, in this first instance, those orders probably salvaged Army Group Center's situation. Later on, Hitler's intrusions into the operation and even tactical spheres would be less helpful—if never quite so absolute nor so counterproductive as his generals claimed after the war.

27 See Megargee, *Inside Hitler's High Command*, 160-161, 172.

28 For a detailed examination of Hitler's goals vis-a-vis the United States, see Norman J.W. Goda, *Tomorrow the World: Hitler, Northwest Africa, and the Path toward America* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1998). See also Adam Tooze, *Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (New York: Viking, 2007), 503-505.

29 WFSt/L (I K Op) Nr. 44 2173/41 g.K.Chefs., 14.12.41: Überblick über die Bedeutung des Kriegseintritts der U.S.A. und Japans, in BArch RM 7/258.

action before the fall of 1942 at the earliest. Assuming action in the European theater, it would have to take place either in North Africa or Norway. (The Allies invaded North Africa in November.) The planners went on to make predictions for Germany's operations in the coming year, and there they proved less astute. They suggested that Germany would be able to bring the war with the USSR to a successful close, after which they could use the resources of European Russia to hold off the British and Americans indefinitely. Hitler generally agreed with that assessment, although he decided to focus on the southern USSR (which would lead him to Stalingrad). He had no idea how to defeat the USA, other than to let the Japanese do it for him, and so, without expressing it openly, he settled on a long-term continental defensive strategy. The 1942 strategy's success would depend, as the 1941 strategy had depended, on knocking out the USSR.

The Germans began the 1941 campaign full of optimism. They had beaten their old enemy France, and driven the British off the Continent. They believed their new enemy was inferior, militarily, politically, and racially. Surely the Wehrmacht had nothing to fear; the whole thing would be over in a few weeks. Indeed, the first few weeks of the invasion seemed to justify the leaders' confidence. The Soviets were inept, disorganized, inexperienced, and confused. Red Army soldiers were killed or taken prisoner by the hundreds of thousands. Vast swaths of territory fell to German advances. The conquerors seemed unstoppable, especially in their own eyes. As summer turned to autumn, though, the situation became a little more worrisome. Where the Germans were strong, they won, but they could not be strong everywhere, and there always seemed to be a new Soviet army over the next hill. Slowly the Germans' attitudes began to shift, but only partially. They paid lip service to the idea that they would not be able to destroy the Soviets' power of resistance in one campaign—"as we knew from the start," they said. They reluctantly set aside plans to continue the advance into Iran and Iraq. Still, though, there was that impulse to land one more blow. Yes, the troops are in a bad way, and the weather is turning cold, and supplies aren't getting through, but the Soviets must be on their last legs. Now is the time for German soldiers to prove their superiority, for their will to triumph. And when at last the German generals, in the midst of the worst crisis of the war to date, finally have no choice but to accept that their plans for 1941 have failed . . . Well, there is always 1942. In the end, the Germans reacted to the prolongation of the war by maintaining their faith in final victory.

Franz Halder summed it up best. In a 1951 letter to one of his former subordinates, he wrote, "a war is only lost when one gives up."[30]

[30] Letter of 6 August, 1951, to Günther Blumentritt, in the Halder papers, BArch N 220/8. Transl. Geoffrey P. Megargee.