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THE STRATEGY OF BARBAROSSA

by Colonel Austin C. Wedemeyer

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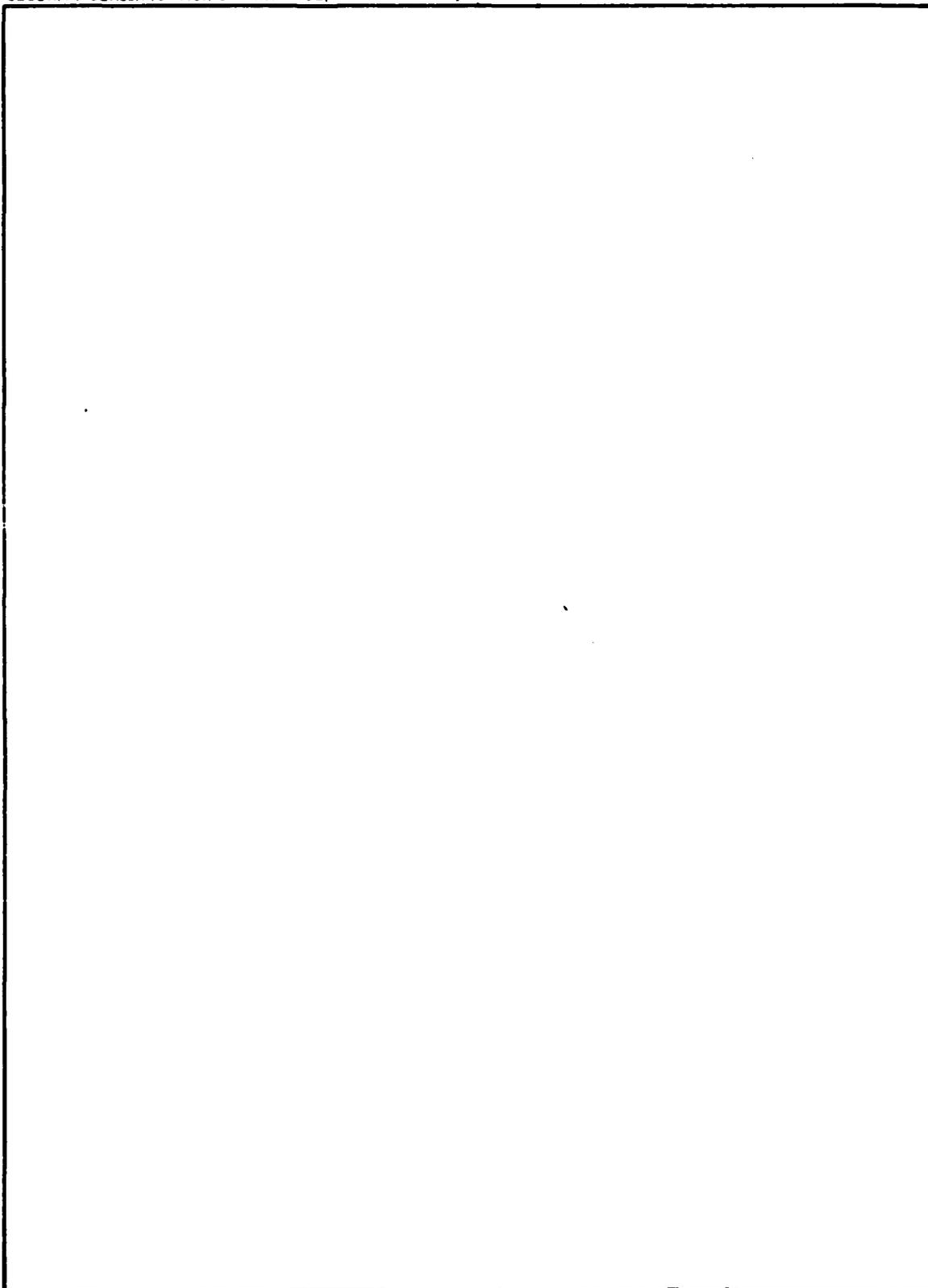
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THE STRATEGY OF BARBAROSSA

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AIR WAR COLLEGE

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No one starts a war--or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so--without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war. . . .

Clausewitz

#### INTRODUCTION

Barbarossa, the German invasion of Russia on 22 June 1941, was conceived as the "masterpiece of conquest." The plan was enormous in size and extremely optimistic in perspective. However, it was based upon the proven effectiveness of the German Army and upon German perceptions of weakened leadership and apparent ineffectiveness of the Soviet armed forces.

It was as if a page had been taken from Clausewitz--war as an extension of policy, well-defined objectives, speed and mass. But there were many lessons of Clausewitz which Hitler seems to have overlooked or purposely ignored. Were the lessons contained in Clausewitz' critique of Napoleon's Russian campaign taken to heart? Were chance and the friction of war adequately considered? Barbarossa was designed to last only "6 to 10" weeks, but it endured for nearly four years and ended in the total defeat of the German nation.

. . . War is not a mere act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political activity by other means.

Clausewitz

#### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

By August 1940, Hitler's armies, with a little help from his allies, had defeated and occupied the major states of continental Europe except for the temporary but untrusted ally, Russia. The Germans had recently won stunning victories over Poland, Norway and France. At Dunkirk, 338,000 men (1:115) had just been saved from annihilation by a desperate evacuation, and the Battle of Britain, though as yet inconclusive, was underway. It was in this heady atmosphere that Hitler seems to have resolved to attack the Soviet Union.

Historians point to four factors which may have formed the basis for Hitler's decision:

First, Britain was a potential, if temporarily weakened, threat to Hitler's grandiose plans. Perhaps the biggest concern was that Britain might close ranks with Russia, entice the United States into the war and thus attack Germany on two fronts. By defeating the Soviets in a single quick campaign, Hitler could postpone or even completely eliminate the British threat.

Second, Russia's appetite for conquering new territories seemed almost as insatiable as Hitler's own. A

plan to divert the Soviets towards the South and East and to carve up the British Empire did not interest Stalin.

Third, Hitler was attracted to the vast resources and Lebensraum which the Ukraine and the plains of European Russia represented. The purges and mass executions of Soviet military leaders and the widespread dissatisfaction with the brutal and repressive Stalinist regime made this vast area ripe for the taking.

Fourth, Hitler contended that National Socialism was philosophically incompatible with Communism, Bolshevism and an "Eastern Europe filled with Jews." In Hitler's mind, ". . . the Slavs were an inferior race and the Russians the most inferior of the Slavs." (4:842) He also identified "Jewish Bolsheviks" as "our deadly enemies." (8:212)

Therefore, having satisfied himself that conflict with Stalin was inevitable, Hitler set about preparing for war with a vengeance.

No conquest can be carried out too quickly and . . . to spread it over a longer period than the minimum needed to complete it makes it not less difficult but more.

Clausewitz

#### STRATEGY ANALYSIS

Hitler's instructions to prepare for the attack on the Soviet Union were contained in Directive #21 of 18 December 1940:

The German Armed Forces must be prepared . . . to crush Soviet Russia in a rapid campaign ('Case Barbarossa'). . . . Preparations . . . will be concluded by 15th May 1941. . . . (8:49)

Some historians cite 15 May 1941 as the planned starting date for Barbarossa. The five-week delay prior to actual initiation is explained by the situation in the Balkans in early 1941, which caused Hitler to divert several armies to Yugoslavia and Greece. Others point to an unusually long winter and melting snow, which left the Russian roads soggy until well into June 1941. However, historian Martin Van Creveld points to the "inability of German industry to supply the necessary material on time." (10:86) Many of the last units to be readied were supplied with captured French material. (10:83) The date finally selected was 22 June. In one of the ironies of history, this was the same date chosen by Napoleon for his invasion of Russia in 1812.

Hitler's plan envisaged that some "120-130 divisions" would defeat Russia by the end of the summer in a quick and decisive campaign. This emphasis on a rapid conclusion was certainly in keeping with the Clausewitzian approach to battle. Yet a note of caution is appropriate. Chance, as Clausewitz noted, is in the nature of war and through the element of chance, "guesswork and luck come to play a great part in war." (3:85)

So confident were the Germans of a quick victory that many soldiers were not provided with proper winter clothing. Some 14,000 German soldiers underwent major amputation operations due to frostbite during the winter of 1941-42. (4:849)

The general plan was to assemble overwhelming forces under a great cloak of secrecy and to strike with lightning speed into the heartland, rolling over the surprised and unprepared Red Army along the way.

The Russians were to be thrown off balance at the start and remorselessly pressed from that moment on; they were never to be permitted a breathing spell, a chance to gather their strength. (11:1)

In Directive #21, Hitler went on to describe the general intention of Barbarossa: "The bulk of the Russian Army stationed in Western Russia will be destroyed . . . Russian forces still capable of giving battle will be prevented from withdrawing into the depths of Russia." (8:49) This last

assertion seemed designed to avoid a serious error made by Napoleon in pursuing remnants of the Russian Army into the Russian steppes.

It was to be a gigantic three-pronged attack along a 1,500 mile front in which massive envelopments would crush the Red Army, leaving the way open to Leningrad, Moscow and the Ukraine. The wide front would draw the enemy forward while spreading him thin. It would also tend to protect German lines of communications to the rear.

Hitler also used three other strategic principles of lesser though still crucial importance: mass, surprise and speed. Although these factors are usually thought of as tactical concepts, Hitler developed and employed them on a scale which raised them to strategic concepts. Their effective use at the beginning of Barbarossa gave them immense strategic value.

Mass: In his use of mass to create an overwhelming shock effect, Hitler built upon the guidance of Clausewitz: ". . . superiority varies in degree . . . it can obviously reach the point where it is overwhelming . . . It thus follows that as many troops as possible should be brought into the engagement at the decisive point." (3:194) Clark (2:46), saw this as:

"The head-on crash of the two greatest armies, the two most absolute systems, in the world. In terms of numbers of men, weight of ammunition, length of front, the desperate crescendo of the fighting, there will never be another day like 22nd June, 1941."

Ziemke (12:203) estimates total German strength committed to the start of Barbarossa at 3,050,000 men. By way of comparison, Stokesburg (6:314) calculates the total size of the Allied Expeditionary Force assembled in England for the Normandy invasion at 2,876,000 and Napoleon assembled "at least 450,000" in June 1812 for the invasion of Russia. (4:530) This is total war on a grander scale than even Clausewitz was able to predict.

Surprise: The cloak of security surrounding Barbarossa was nearly absolute. Even Hitler's top field commanders were to be told at first that the plan was merely a "precaution." Hitler and Ribbentrop repeatedly denied, even to the German ambassador to the Kremlin, that there was any truth to the rumors of war floating around Moscow. British and American intelligence reports directly to the Kremlin gave ample warning of the attack, but Stalin passed them off as capitalist efforts to deceive him. Stalin, in fact, renewed efforts to meet agreed export levels of strategic materiel to Germany at great sacrifice to the Soviets. The last trainload of strategic materials reached Germany in the hour that Hitler launched Barbarossa. Well after the start of the battle, German radio operators were still monitoring messages to Moscow: "We are being fired upon; what shall we do?" (2:44) Because of Stalin's obstinacy, the Soviets were totally unprepared for the attack.

Speed: The Germans, if they did not invent Blitzkrieg warfare, certainly brought it to perfection in Poland, France and the Balkans. No resource was spared to make Barbarossa the most spectacular example of lightning warfare. The progress of preparations and the intelligence reports of Soviet strength were so reassuring that in February 1941, Hitler rendered the judgment that "When Barbarossa commences, the world will hold its breath . . ." (5:1078) By the end of the first day, Manstein's 56th Corps had penetrated over fifty miles into Russian territory - resistance had not yet begun to stiffen. Yet by August 10th Army Group Center, having penetrated to a depth of 400 miles discovered that they were behind Napoleon's timetable in 1812. (4:844) On August 11, Chief of Staff Halder noted in his diary: "The whole situation makes it increasingly plain that we have underestimated the Russian Colossus." Perhaps the friction of war was beginning to make itself plainly felt. Clausewitz (3:358) stated categorically that ". . . the defensive form of warfare is intrinsically stronger than the offensive." He seems to have predicted the course of the Russian campaign when he says:

"If defense is the stronger form of war, yet has a negative object, it follows that it should be used only so long as weakness compels, and be abandoned as soon as we are strong enough to pursue a positive object."

Bonaparte may have been wrong to engage in the Russian campaign at all; at least the outcome certainly shows that he miscalculated . . .

Clausewitz

#### STRATEGY ASSESSMENT

Hitler was a consummate politician. He well understood that war is an extension of policy. The German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact of 1939 allowed Hitler to carry out his aims in Poland and Western Europe by precluding an alliance between Russia, Britain and France. But once Europe was under Hitler's control, Stalin's turn would come. So when the instructions were given to prepare for an invasion of Russia, the German General Staff thoroughly and carefully planned for Operation Barbarossa. On paper, it was a textbook example of Clausewitz' approach to war. There was a well defined political objective, to crush Soviet Russia, and a clearly defined center of gravity--the Russian Army was to be destroyed. Finally, there was the strategic application of mass, speed and surprise.

Many would say that the political objective, conquest of Russia, was wrong in the first place. But Clausewitz would leave that determination to Hitler, just as he refused to pass judgment on Napoleon's decision to invade Russia. ". . . we argue that if he was to aim at that objective, there was, broadly speaking, no other way of gaining it."  
(3:628)

Had history permitted a discussion of Barbarossa between Hitler and Clausewitz during the planning phase, the latter probably would not have opposed the invasion once the political decision was made. He had said of Napoleon more than a century earlier: "The risk of losing his army in the process had to be accepted; that was the stake in the game, the price of his vast hopes." (3:268) However, it is likely that he would have counseled Hitler to read again the sections on chance and friction in war.

Hitler clearly identified the destruction of the Red Army as a key objective. For Hitler, this was the Soviet "center of gravity." The Red Army represented not only the first obstacle in his path, but also the very lifeblood and security base of the regime, the prop which held up the commissars and Stalin himself. No one would have understood more clearly than Hitler the direct link between the Army and the dictatorial regime of Stalin. Hitler and many of his officers felt that the Russian peasantry would rise up and throw off the regime even before the German Army had completed its task of defeating the Soviets.

In more general terms, the whole of Russia west of the Urals was the objective. Hitler saw the vast potential of the resources and industrial capacity of Western Russia. However, there was some disagreement between Hitler and his generals, at least initially, about the importance of a

direct drive on Moscow. If Hitler did not specifically identify Leningrad or Moscow as objectives, it was probably because he was certain that they would all fall quickly before the Wehrmacht. Barbarossa was to be a geopolitical land grab of historic proportions in the space of a summer. So even if Hitler had reread Clausewitz on chance in war, it is probable that he would have considered the stakes high enough to take the gamble.

Hitler's mindset and perceptions are important in this connection. He relied on the known capabilities of the Germany Army in blitzkrieg warfare and on the intelligence estimates of the Soviet strength. He assumed that the Russian military leadership had been decimated in the purges of 1937-38 and that the soldiers would be baffled by a mechanical war. They were known to still rely on horse cavalry, of which there were some 34 divisions in 1937. Indeed, Clark (2:138) shows photos of cavalymen riding into battle with drawn sabres against Hitler's forces. It must be noted however, that horses sometimes have distinct advantages over tanks on Russia's muddy spring roads. And finally, Hitler's Achilles heel--illogical, irrational hatred and prejudice--colored his thinking and planning and limited his objectivity. It may very well be that the key to Hitler's downfall was his underestimation of the strength and patriotism of the Soviet citizen--the "will power and fatalism and

that readiness to accept terrible sufferings that are essentially Russian qualities." (2:42)

→ Throughout this essay, numerous parallels <sup>are</sup> ~~have been~~ drawn between the campaigns of Hitler and of Napoleon. Clausewitz' assessment of Napoleon's 1812 campaign can be applied almost word for word to Hitler's 1941 Barbarossa: ¶ We maintain that the 1812 campaign failed because the Russian government kept its nerve and the people remained loyal and steadfast. . . . the fault . . . lay in his being late in starting the campaign, in the lives he squandered by his tactics, his neglect of matters of supply and of his line of retreat. ¶ (3:628) We might also point to the overconfidence, vanity and hubris that these two men had in common. Neither seemed capable of owning up to a monumental error in judgment or of calling a retreat even when faced with certain disaster.



It is legitimate to judge an event by its outcome,  
for this is its soundest criterion.

Clausewitz

#### CONCLUSION

In this analysis of Operation Barbarossa, two  
conclusions stand out:

First, no matter how carefully an operation may have  
been planned, chance is always a factor. After calculating  
the probabilities of success, the wise planner will always  
build in a cushion and reserves to improve the opportunities  
for success. Military planners and strategists are always  
tempted to plan for a short, decisive war, probably a case of  
trying to reduce the uncertainties by emphasizing friendly  
strengths and enemy weaknesses in the short run. But it may  
also be an intuitive recognition that uncertainties multiply  
with time, that the possibilities for the future course of  
events soon exceed the limits of the planner to offer  
realistic solutions. The problems are magnified when whole  
nations commit themselves to a cause.

Second, one must never underestimate the patriotism  
of the Russian soldier, his nationalism or his love for  
"Mother Russia." Soldiers always seem to find additional  
inner strength when fighting for their homeland. That  
characteristic seems to be particularly true for the  
Russians. On the other hand, this trait leads to interesting  
speculation about how well ideology and nationalism would

sustain the Soviet soldier in a long war outside his homeland. Recent Soviet performance in Afganistan leaves the question open.

Ultimately the analysis of Barbarossa supports Clausewitz' contention that war is filled with unknowns. Unknowns seem to be in particularly rich supply when war involves huge nations. More careful attention to the lessons of Clausewitz may have caused Hitler to reconsider his invasion of Russia. But this presupposes complete rationality, which we do not always attribute to Hitler.

For the Russians, living memories of World War II seem to have been a powerful deterrent to war. Let us hope that the deterrent does not die with the old soldiers.

Clausewitz would find much to recommend in the defensive orientation which the United States has chosen. Certainly he would support negotiations leading to arms reductions and political settlements. But we must glean our own lessons from Hitler's mistakes. They seem to be: do not attack the Russian on his home territory; if war comes, expect it to be long; if war is long, plan on much uncertainty.

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