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Hitler's character and its impact on Operation Barbarossa

Matthew Kowalski

On June 22, 1941, Adolf Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa, his invasion of the Soviet Union, which he looked upon as the fulfillment of his life's mission. When assessing the German invasion of the Soviet Union, most historians will point to the immense geographic and logistical disadvantages faced by the Germans as the main reasons for the campaign's failure. This said, many of these disadvantages could have been nullified, if not for a series of blunders committed by Adolf Hitler during the opening phases of Operation Barbarossa. Almost every one of these strategic blunders were results of deeply rooted flaws in Hitler's character. These major flaws were his inflated beliefs in his skills as a military tactician and his program of waging a war of annihilation on racial and ideological terms. Both of these would prove to be disastrous in the key early months of the Russian campaign, when the German army could have defeated the Soviet Union before it could harness its advantages in manpower and greater industrial output. Rather Hitler's flawed decision-making in this key opening stage of the invasion negated the potential for a quick victory which he needed and resulted in a long war of attrition that Germany simply had no hope of winning.

Before examining Hitler's impact on the course on the Russian campaign, we must first explore what forged his character. The roots of the racial worldview that shaped his character, and indeed the invasion of Russia itself, can be found in his formative years and are summed up in his book Mein Kampf. This idea of seeking lebensraum {living space} at the expense of the Slavs, whom he considered untermench {sub-human}, was not an original one. This is made clear in this quote, "other Germans, other Europeans, had talked and written in racist terms before Hitler; but he alone set about translating ideology into action." {Bullock 415}

This said, we must conclude that Hitler's racism was inherited from the intellectual movements of the late 19th century, which he was first exposed to during his time in Vienna from 1908-13. Indeed, in Mein Kampf he clearly states the importance of this period of his life in his proclamation that, "during this time I formed the basic picture of the world and ideology which has become the granite foundation of my deeds." {Hitler 50} The Austro-Hungarian Empire, of which Hitler was a product, was in a state of decay with its large non-German minorities clamoring for greater autonomy. For the zealous German nationalists of the day, the future survival of the Teutonic race lied in the colonization and exploitation of the lands to the east. To support their rhetoric, they looked toward the "scientific racism" implied in the philosophy of Social Darwinism. This perversion of Darwin's theory of survival of the fittest, concluded that races like all other living things were engaged in a struggle against one another. As in Darwin, one race will prevail in this struggle

because it is biologically superior. In the hands of proto-Nazis, like the racial theorists Adolf Lanz and the geopolitical scientist Karl Haushofer, this biologically superior race was applied to the Germanic peoples. All of this would have had a great impact on the impressionable young artist Adolf Hitler, who at the time was jobless and searching for meaning. The notion that there was a "hierarchy of races" would go far to help alleviate the young Hitler's own personal sense of inferiority.

The impact of this racial worldview that Hitler had first absorbed in Vienna, and then expanded upon, would become apparent in his assessment and conduct of the war in Russia. One result of this deep-rooted facet of Hitler's character was his fatal under-estimation of his Soviet adversary. In his book Operation Barbarossa, Bryan Fugate states that "the narrow-minded Nazi prejudice about the Russian people were perhaps the single biggest problem to overcome." {Fugate 75} In the eyes of Hitler, the Soviet Union was inherently weak due to the fact that "Bolshevism had robbed the Russian people of those Germanic organizers who had created the Russian state and replaced them with that ferment and of decomposition." {Rich 210} This rabid racism, plus the poor performance of the Red Army in the Finnish campaign of 1939-40 and in the opening months of Operation Barbarossa, led Hitler to the conclusion that the war in the East would last five months at the most.

The truth of the matter was that the Red Army's early setbacks, were due more to the disastrous effects of Stalin's purges of his military leadership in the mid-thirties, then to the actual quality of the Soviet fighting man. The Germans would soon learn that when led by competent officers, such as a Marshall Zhukov, the Red Army was just as effective a fighting force as the Wehrmacht. Also, the assertion that victory could be achieved in a relatively short period of time only served to blind Hitler to the reality of preparing for a possible winter campaign. On three separate occasions Field Marshall von Brauchitisch requested that winter clothing be issued to the troops. However, every time the matter was brought up, Hitler assured him that victory would be achieved before winter set in.

The other major blunder that came as a result of Hitler's racism, was the failure of the Germans to utilize the dissatisfaction of significant portions of the Soviet population to harsh Stalinist rule to their own advantage. In his work How Hitler Could Have Won World War Two, Bevin Alexander is of opinion that of all of Hitler's blunders, "his most disastrous error was to go into the Soviet Union as a conqueror, instead of a liberator." {Alexander 81} In the early months of war in the East, many segments of the Soviet population saw the German invasion as a deliverance from the terror of the Stalin regime. This attitude was particularly prevalent in the areas that had only recently been brought under Soviet control under the terms of the Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 1939. In the Baltic Republics and the western Ukraine, there existed strong separatist movements that the Germans could have used to their own ends. It is very conceivable that had Hitler sought to

exploit these sentiments, "the Bolshevik regime itself may have disintegrated, as the Tsarist armies had in 1917." {Shirer 939} Some have even gone so far as to estimate that a "German policy of liberation would have been enough to assure a complete German victory in 1914 or 1942." {Dupuy 95}

All this said, however, Hitler's conviction that the Slavs were an inferior people, compromised what could have been one of the best opportunities the Germans had in defeating the Soviet Union in a quick campaign. Hitler saw the war against Russia as the fulfillment of his dream for the attainment of "lebensraum." As far as he was concerned the Slavic population would have to be systematically decreased, in order to make way for the future German settlement. Hitler's Reich's Commissar for the Eastern Territories, Alfred Rosenberg, best sums up this policy by his quote, "we see no reason for any obligation on our part to feed the Russian people with the products of that surplus territory." This policy of exploitation and repression automatically negated the positive impact of the strong anti-Stalin sentiments of many Soviet citizens, as it simply replaced one form of terror with another. The results of this policy in military terms was that what could have been a wide degree of active support on the part of the Russian population, instead became a greater desire to resist manifesting itself in the form of partisan warfare. A war was waged behind the lines that not only threatened the German's over-extended lines of communication and supply, but also tied -down additional troops which were needed in the frontlines.

After dealing with the blunders attributed to Hitler's racial views, we must now examine the elements of his character that influenced his military decision-making. The first of these aspects which needs to be looked at is Hitler's firm belief in his military genius. This inflated view of his skills was deeply rooted in the success of the Wehrmacht's previous campaigns, particularly in the west in the spring of 1940. His general staff, in planning the invasion of France, had been wrong in their assessment of where best to strike at the Allies. Their reworking of the old Schlieffen Plan lacked imagination, while the Manstein strategy adopted by Hitler, led to German victory in less than six weeks. As Bevin Alexander puts it, "the adoption of the Manstein Plan by Hitler, was the best decision he ever made." {Alexander 7} This and the slew of other successes, such as the move into the Rhineland in 1936, in which Hitler's decisions proved correct as opposed to the assessments of his generals, had infused him with a sense of arrogance.

Hitler's inflated opinion of his own military greatness may also have been a result of his experience in the First World War and his long held mistrust of the German military elite. As a frontline soldier in the trenches Hitler always had been under the impression that "he the humble veteran knew more about the conduct of war than the generals." {Overy 274} After all, was it not these same members of the military elite who had during the course of Great War, questioned his leadership

qualities? Their assessment of the then Lance corporal Hitler was that he was “too moody to ever rise to a position of leadership,” regardless of his impressive war record. It could be assumed that this feeling of being snubbed might have had a profound impact on Hitler’s future relationship with his generals. His domination of staff conferences and stifling of any independent thought but his own, may have been as Field Marshall von Rinchthofen put it, “sweet revenge for the ex-corporal.” {Overy 277}

All this said, however, Hitler had practically no real experience at military leadership. His decision making was not based on any practical military thought process, but rather a combination of his belief in the ability of the German fighting man to overcome adversity and a habit of reckless gambling at the expense of an overall strategy. All of these facets of Hitler’s military thinking contributed in some way to the execution of the invasion of Russia. His belief in the “will” of the German fighting men, a result of his racial outlook, was to form the basis of Hitler’s policy of strategic withdrawals, which was simply that they were not allowed. The very thought of yielding ground to the enemy, even when it made more strategic sense to do so was absolutely repugnant to Hitler. It was his opinion that simply by their sheer courage the German soldier would somehow always win the day, even under intense pressure. The results of this “stand and die” defense were only the senseless waste of men and material. Hitler, however, failed to see the coastlines of this strategy. When approached by General Guderian about this problem he replied, “Do you think Frederick the Great’s grenadiers were anxious to die? They wanted to live too, but the king was right in asking them to sacrifice themselves. I too am entitled to ask any German soldier to lay down his life.” {Bullock 737}

Another of Hitler’s character traits that effected his ability to lead effectively was his inability to balance his role as both a military and political leader. Hitler, for all his political skill was never able to effectively fit into the model of an effective wartime commander and chief. Rather than laying out an overall strategy and leaving the military details up to the professionals, in the fashion of a Roosevelt or Churchill, Hitler was obsessed with the most minute details of waging war. Regularly at conferences “Hitler interfered with the smallest details of battle; regiments and air squadrons were moved on the instructions of the Supreme Commander.” {Overy 277} The results of this meddling was that, “instead of an overall strategy Hitler substituted a jumble of individual decisions and orders.” {Overy 277}

Finally, the two character traits that had the greatest impact on Hitler’s execution of the war in Russia, was his habit of opportunistic gambling. From the very beginnings of his career, Hitler had showed himself to be both a gambler and an opportunist. From the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact to the invasion of France, he had always been willing to seize an opportunity if he felt it would fulfill his aims. Hitler’s opportunistic nature is best summed up in the statement that, “once

embroiled in a camp, he was ready to toss away even his general goal to seize an opportunity that appeared.”{Alexander 98} So far, this policy of reckless gambling had resulted in nothing but success. In the war in the East, however, Hitler’s persistent opportunism most likely compromised Germany’s best chance of achieving victory in a quick campaign.

Hitler’s Operation Barbarossa on paper

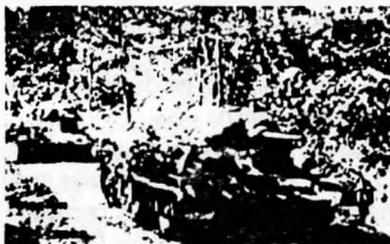


During the operational planning of invasion of the Soviet Union, Hitler’s generals were of the opinion that Moscow was to be the campaign’s overall goal. This strategy made logical military sense, due to the centralized nature of the Stalin regime. Moscow was for all intensive purposes the nerve center of the entire Soviet Empire. It was from this epicenter of the Soviet Union, where all governmental policy was formulated and then distributed. The fall of Moscow would then mean, “if not the complete crumbling of the entire Union, at least the paralysis of her effective resistance, owing to the chaos in communication and administrative life.”{Anders 23} This said Hitler, who never appreciated the strategic importance of the Soviet capital to begin with, delayed the drive on Moscow by recklessly committing divisions to other sectors of the front.

The prime example of this was his decision to move the bulk of Army Group B’s panzers to the Ukraine, which were rapidly advancing towards Moscow, for the assault on Kiev in late August. This move has been classified as being, “one of the greatest examples in history of how a leader can be reduced by a vision of short term gain into abandoning a course of action that would have given him victory.”{Alexander 98} His reasoning for this sudden change in strategy was not the product of sound military judgment, although there was a large concentration

of Red Army units were defending the city, but rather pure opportunism. Hitler simply just could not resist the temptation of possibly encircling an entire Soviet army group. Indeed, the number of prisoners taken following the German victory at Kiev was staggering, numbering some 665,000 men.

Hitler's Panzer Divisions



This said, however, it delayed the drive on Moscow, which was by far the more important strategic objective. By the time Hitler ordered the resumption of the drive on Moscow, on September 30th, he had given the Soviets time to prepare an ample defense for the city. The assault on Kiev also wasted precious men and material that would have been better used in the assault on Moscow, at a time when the German supply lines were becoming increasingly overextended. Although by far the most serious consequence of Hitler's decision to delay the drive on Moscow, this meant that German troops would run the risk of failing to capture the city before the onset of winter. This unanticipated eventuality was why the German army had to stop its advance in December, within sight of the Kremlin. The German assault on Moscow, code named Operation Typhoon, was first slowed by muddy roads in October and then finally ground to a halt by the snow and subzero temperatures of the Russian winter.

Russia's greatest ally during Hitler's Invasion: The Winter



The brunt of the blame for the failure to capture Moscow, and conceivably ending the war on the Eastern Front, squarely rests on the shoulders of Adolf Hitler. It was his decision to halt the drive on the Soviet capital and gamble at Kiev that doomed the prospects of Germany achieving victory in 1941. Bevin Alexander's comment that, "at Kiev Germany won a great local victory, but surrendered its last chance to the win the war" {Alexander 99}, best sums up this fatal blunder. The missed opportunity to capture Moscow before winter meant simply that Germany was now faced with a longer war in the East, which it could not win. The massive advantages in manpower and industrial production possessed by the Soviets would eventually overpower the Third Reich.

In conclusion, the defeat of Nazi Germany on the Eastern Front was due to several factors. The operation itself was an immense gamble to begin with, considering the immense advantages the USSR possessed in size, population, and industrial capability. This said the ability of the German armed forces to achieve victory was severely compromised by decisions made by Hitler during the early stages of the campaign. These blunders, among them the failure to exploit the disenchantment of the Russian population with the Stalin regime and the costly delay to press on to Moscow, were all direct results of flaws within Hitler's own character. Had Hitler not pursued his brutal racial policy toward the Slavs and left the actual waging of the war to the military professionals, he may have achieved his aim of a quick victory. Instead, he found himself embroiled in a prolonged conflict in which Germany simply could not win. Antoine Henri Jomini may have put it best when he observed, "Russia is a country that is easy to get into, but very difficult to get out of."

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