



# Operation Barbarossa: A Lesson in Hubris and Strategy

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## Operation Barbarossa A Lesson in Hubris and Strategy

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If Hitler had paid closer attention to Napoleon's Russian invasion failure, World War II (WWII) might have turned out differently. Hitler's initial invasion of Russia, named Operation Barbarossa, met the same fate as Napoleon's campaign: a devastating defeat (Bongi, 2015). While Napoleon and Hitler fought in different eras, the art of war and its fundamental concepts have not changed.

Hitler understood operational art and design in that, "connecting resources and tactical actions to strategic ends is the responsibility of the operational commander—the commander must be able to explain how proposed actions will result in desired effects, as well as the potential risks of such actions" (Joint Chiefs of Staff [JCS], 2020, p. IV-4). However, Hitler chose to ignore history and the art of war and his lesson in hubris is now one for the history books. This article aims to analyze Operation Barbarossa through the lens of operational art

and design using centers of gravity, arranging operations, and operational reach to explain Germany's strategic failure. With everything currently going on in Ukraine, and the U.S. Army's recent shifts toward LSCO and MDO, a refresher in operational art and design is warranted.

### Background

Before WWII began, Hitler had ambitious plans for the Soviet Union, but he did not want to fight a war on two fronts. Russia's leader, Joseph Stalin, knew war was inevitable, but he needed to stall until his country was ready to fight. Therefore, the two nations signed the Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1939. The agreement was mutually beneficial. Hitler and Stalin used it to cover their true intentions of grabbing land from neighboring countries and building up their military capabilities (Bongi, 2015). Despite the pact's advantages, it was short-lived and ended abruptly.

Hitler knew he would eventually invade the Soviet Union, its vast land and resources were essential to fulfill his vision laid out in *Mein Kampf* (Gompert et al., 2014). The only thing standing in his way was the Red Army. Thanks to the blitzkrieg tactic, Nazi forces had achieved several quick victories in Holland, Belgium, France, Yugoslavia, and Greece (Bongi, 2015). Despite its military prowess, Hitler knew Germany could not afford a protracted war with the Soviet Union because it did not have enough soldiers or resources to support a war on two fronts.

Hitler relied upon various intelligence sources to help shape his political and military plans. According to intelligence reports, the Soviets were ill-prepared for a prolonged war. Their economy and industry could not handle it (Kahn, 2012). This intelligence, combined with earlier victories in the east, gave Hitler the confidence to proceed with the invasion of the Soviet Union. On June 22, 1941, the German army began Operation Barbarossa, initially estimated to last only six to eight weeks (Bongi, 2015). Despite Germany's early successes, the operation lasted a brutal six months. Hitler made several mistakes regarding the ends, ways, means, and risks of his operational art and design. Much like Napoleon's attempt, the harsh Soviet environment proved to be too much and delivered Hitler his first significant loss of WWII.

## Ends, Ways, Means, Risks Defined

Joint planning doctrine states that "joint planning is the deliberate process of determining how to implement strategic guidance: how (the **ways**) to use military capabilities (the **means**) in time and space to achieve objectives (the **ends**) within an acceptable level of risk" (JCS, 2020, p. I-1). It is important to understand this concept because it helps explain Hitler's vision and the plan. His vision and intent enabled his staff to develop an operational approach to achieve his desired end state. To understand Hitler's operational art and design thought process, it is crucial to understand Operation Barbarossa's end state.

## Ends

The joint operations doctrine declares an end state is "the set of required conditions that defines achievement of the commander's objectives" (JCS, 2018, p. GL-9). Hitler's end state for Operation Barbarossa was well-defined during the planning stage. He knew the Soviet Union would fall if he could defeat the Red Army and capture



German soldiers fighting in the Soviet Union as part of Operation Barbarossa, 1941. (Photo courtesy of the Department of Defense)

Moscow (Bongi, 2015). Though Moscow was the main objective, Hitler also determined, against the advice of his staff, that Leningrad and Kyiv were also vital to his end state (Gompert et al., 2014). This weakened his economy of force by going with an ill-advised multipronged attack on several fronts instead of solely targeting Moscow. Regardless of his choice, Hitler determined the objectives and explained the ways to accomplish the mission.

## Ways

According to retired U.S. Army Col. Dale Eikmeier, an instructor at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, (2014), the ways are critical capabilities (the how) that accomplish the objectives and lead to the ends. The purpose of Operation Barbarossa was to penetrate deeply with armor and airpower and enable armor freedom of maneuver to achieve an encirclement (Gompert et al., 2014). Hitler's understanding and application of the ways was instrumental in Germany's victories early in WWII. Despite the early successes, Hitler ultimately misjudged the effects that arranging operations and operational reach played in achieving his desired end state.

## Arranging Operations

Coordinated blitzkrieg operations enabled German forces to use speed to seize terrain, destroy equipment, and quickly neutralize the enemy. Arranging these types of operations involves timing, synchronization, and efficiency to achieve the desired end state "with the least cost to personnel and other resources" (JCS, 2020, p. IV-36). The tempo of the blitzkrieg tactic against the Soviets slowed in late July due to weather and logistical issues. This lull is where Hitler made a critical mistake. Instead of taking an operational pause and allowing his main ef-

fort to rest and wait for resupply, Hitler diverted forces to help achieve his other objectives at Leningrad and Kyiv (Gompert et al., 2014).

An operational pause is “a temporary halt in operations” that helps “regenerate combat power or augment sustainment and forces for the next phase” (JCS, 2020, pp. GL-11 & 195). This mistake gave the Soviets time to fortify their defensive positions and bring Stalin’s eastern army to Moscow (Gompert et al., 2014). Hitler’s decision to move forces further away from the best logistical route weakened the German military’s operational reach.

### **Operational Reach**

Operational reach is the ability to employ military capabilities for a specific time and distance (JCS, 2020). Hitler greatly misjudged his operational reach as the speed and distance at which his forces advanced caused them to outrun their logistical support.

The Soviet infrastructure further contributed to Germany’s logistical problems because the roads were in terrible condition, and the railways were a different gauge than those used in Germany (Kahn, 2012). Thus German forces had to build or rebuild the infrastructure as they went to keep up with the rapidly advancing army. Poor strategic decisions, environmental factors, and failing infrastructure led to Hitler’s forces stalling just miles outside Moscow (Gompert et al., 2014). Hitler failed to properly manage his ways despite knowing the consequences of his means.

### **Means**

The Panzer tank divisions and the Luftwaffe air force were critical means, allowing German infantry forces to quickly advance. The means are the resources used by the ways to accomplish the ends (JCS, 2020). The German military was the essential means Hitler intended to achieve his ends through the ways of blitzkrieg. Simplified, the means are people, places, or things and may be different at each level of war (Eikmeier, 2014). The means are vital because it is where the center of gravity (COG) resides.

### **Center of Gravity**

Commanders and planners must understand the COG to ensure strategic and operational success. Joint doctrine defines the COG as “the source of power or strength that enables a military force to achieve its objective and is what an opposing force can orient its actions against that will lead to enemy failure” (JCS, 2020, p. IV-22).

During the planning process, Hitler identified two COGs. The strategic COG being the Soviet military and the operational COG being Moscow (Bongi, 2015). Hitler determined this because Moscow was the central hub for all four of the Soviet Union’s instruments of national power. The diplomatic headquarters was the capital of

the country and where Stalin headquartered. The Soviet military received all its orders from and all information flowed through and from Moscow. Also, 18% of all industries inside the Soviet Union came from Moscow (Bongi, 2015). If Moscow fell, the military and the country could not function. If Hitler could take it, he would take all the Soviet Union and potentially win WWII.

Despite correctly identifying the strategic and operational COGs, Hitler went against his staff’s recommendations, as well as the lessons from Napoleon’s historic failed invasion. He did not stick to the strategic COG and became distracted by extraneous efforts at Leningrad and Kyiv (Eikmeier, 2014). In hindsight, he should have used one main force to conduct a deep penetration maneuver directly to Moscow. Unity of effort would have been the best use of arranging operations while staying within Germany’s operational reach. The envelopment of Soviet forces in Germany’s direct path would have forced other Soviet forces to mass in and around Moscow. This approach would have allowed Hitler to effectively deal two devastating blows with one strike, defeating the Red Army and capturing Moscow. Instead, Hitler chose to split his forces into three groups, attacking the entire Red Army across the vast Soviet Union, all while attempting to reach Moscow before winter hit. While many contributing factors came to bear on Hitler and his forces, his complete disregard for operational art and design led him to take unnecessary risks.

### **Risks**

Hitler made assumptions and took several risks that led to his defeat. Failure to take Moscow left Hitler’s forces deep in Soviet territory during a brutal winter with no easy way to withdraw, and lacking logistical infrastructure. Joint planning doctrine states, “military risk is the estimated probability and consequence of the joint force’s projected inability to achieve current or future military objectives (risk-to-mission), while providing and sustaining sufficient military resources (risk-to-force)” (JCS, 2020, p. I-20). It is not that Hitler did not understand risk, he simply ignored the cost to achieve his end state. Hitler’s early success in the west fed his ego encouraging him to take risks in the Barbarossa campaign. He thought he was invincible, but the Soviet winter proved him wrong.

Hitler did not believe the Red Army was a match for his forces despite their home-field advantage and superior numbers. He also underestimated the Soviet military and economy because of inaccurate intelligence (Kahn, 2012). He believed the Soviet Union’s industrial production capabilities could not match the speed of his blitzkrieg, nor could they handle a prolonged war.

Lastly, operational mismanagement threw off critical timing. The misallocation of resources meant Germany’s main effort was unprepared and exposed to a Soviet

counterattack (Bongi, 2015). The weather continued to deteriorate, further inhibiting the now tired and freezing blitzkrieg forces. The decision to move away from the strategic and operational COGs were risks-to-mission and forces and no mitigation measures were in place to counterbalance these risks.

Hitler's risky decisions led Nazi forces to stall just miles from Moscow. Joint planning doctrine calls this the *culmination*, the "point in time and/or space when the operation can no longer maintain momentum" (JCS, 2020, p. IV-28). The Soviet Union capitalized on these mistakes and counterattacked. On December 6, 1941, the Soviet Union transitioned from defense into offense, marking the turning point for the invasion and WWII (Gompert et al., 2014). The following day, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and brought the United

States into WWII. Hitler now had to contend with Russia to the east and Britain, the U.S., and other allied forces to the west.

## Conclusion

A careful analysis of Operation Barbarossa through the lens of operational art and design using center of gravity, arranging operations, and operational reach provides a clear overall picture of Nazi Germany's strategic failure. Hitler was a student of war, but he chose to ignore historical lessons and his operational environment as well as the advice from his staff and generals in favor of his blind ambition and ego. He thought himself better than Napoleon, but they suffered the same fate in the end. These are important lessons to take away as the U.S. military enters a new age of warfare against near-peer competitors. ■

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