



If there is a common wargamer conversation that drives me crazy: the "Why didn't the Germans win in 1941, after all the Soviets were no threat?" debate. That is no debate at all...the Russian winter did not beat the Germans it was the Red Army! Let's look into this...

Soviet Errors

First off the Soviets had just completed a move from the Stalin Line deep in the interior of the USSR, out to the western approaches of eastern Europe. Leaving this defensive line; which had been constructed to defeat armor thrusts; meant the Red Army had to make do with an improvised defense line. Net result of that line was fewer anti-tank and anti-air weapons operating when the Germans hit, and due to Soviet unfamiliarity with the area many defensive positions were poorly placed and wiped out very quickly.

This move also meant that at best the Red Army would receive only limited supplies, this was due to the fact that too few trucks existed; many had broken down during the armies initial move. Poor roads and an absence of viable train stations meant also an increased work load for the still existing trucks and wagons which were already unable to support the huge number of units on line.

The VVS (Red Air Force) had not moved their full front line strength forward far enough to help out the ground forces. Most of the Soviet air units in the front line were flying obsolete aircraft due for rotation out into training squadrons, and many of the pilots were under trained. Though hundreds of air fields were supposedly available to the VVS few were in a usable condition by May 1941.

Next: Soviet training was only starting to integrate the ideas of coordination anti-tank and anti-aircraft operation against large armored formations and much of the equipment had not reached the front line units.

Many German Errors are conveniently forgotten or underestimated in their importance, lets look at the worst of these:

The Germans lacked current intelligence about the Soviet Union production figures, as well as the Red Army. This lack is striking when considering this: The Germans and Soviets had cooperated very closely with each other from 1924-1934, in fact many German officers were trained in tank warfare, air warfare and infantry maneuver in Soviet Russia ALONG SIDE Soviet officers and units. Yet it appears that none of these men were closely debriefed by Ober Kommando der Wehrmacht before the attack was launched.

The Germans lacked realism in their planning for Barbarossa. The May 1941 intelligence brief on Soviet forces (OKW assessment) said the Red Army had 100 to 125 division sized units in European Russia and could raise another 50. Yet by the time of Zhukov's offensive in December of 1941 the Soviets had raised 300 division sized units and transferred large numbers of Siberian troops complete with their equipment to the Moscow front.

The Germans did not have sufficient trucks or rail cars and engines with Russian gauge to supply the huge force that was launched by Germany into the Soviet Union. In fact the hope of the Wehrmacht planners was to capture abandoned Soviet equipment. This did not happen as many trains were shuttled east or simply destroyed by the Red Army before capture was possible. Instead the Germans used trucks, many of the vehicle were French, British or Belgian and were not robust enough for the terrible Soviet Road systems. The real victims of this failing was the front line fighting units, the very people who needed supply the most.

The biggest mistake was in the German underestimation of the Russian will to resist.

The Winter Myth

If it worked on Napoleon, it must work on Hitler too right?! NO! In fact the German army had already suffered 366,000 casualties from all sources by October 1941. Bare in mind this was BEFORE the snow began to fly. With only 400,00 replacement troops in the Ersatz Heer the reserves were falling fast. Also remember the men being killed were trained and veteran professionals, all at the cutting edge of the war. They could not be replaced simply by putting a body in a slot. Only very few of the 3.5 million men that went into Russia in June of 1941 carried a rifle, drove a tank, or flew an airplane. Most were service and maintenance types NOT warriors.

The winter of 1941 was in fact average and in Southern Russia the snow fall was below average. Yes, it was cold but not any colder than average. The Germans were so unaware of Russian conditions they did not recognize that what they were experiencing in winter 1941 was simply, winter in Russia. The total lack of winter gear for the Wehrmacht in 1941 was part and parcel with the euphoria and sense of invincibility that underwrote Operation Barbarossa from the very beginning. A sunny lack of realism that

made the Germans believe they could knock out the Soviets in 6 to 8 weeks ended in disaster for the Wehrmacht long before the snow flew.