

Soviet Losses

By Museum Volunteer Gary Silver

Russia was saved from absolute defeat by the size of the country and of its armies. The Germans captured great tracts of territory, but larger ones remained. They destroyed hundreds of Russian divisions, yet there were always more. [Hastings, p.156] For all the Wehrmacht's dramatic successes and advances, the Red Army remained unbroken. If many of Stalin's soldiers readily surrendered, many more replaced them, fighting on, even in hopeless circumstances, often displaying superb infantry training. As early as August, 1941, German intelligence reported, "it is increasingly clear that we underestimated the Russian colossus ... we believed that the enemy had about 200 divisions. Now we are counting 360. These forces are not always well armed and equipped and they are often poorly led. But they are there! ... Hitler's young crusaders found it intoxicating to ride their bucketing tanks across hundreds of miles of enemy territory, but the strain on machinery was relentless; as men grew tired, so did their vehicles." The strength of many German formations was badly reduced: by autumn, 20 percent of the original invasion force was gone, along with two-thirds of its armor and vehicles. "A division commander wrote of the importance of reducing losses 'if we do not intend to win ourselves to death.'" [Hastings, p.153-4]

Barbarossa's Impact on the War's Outcome

Starting in late November 1941, a conference of key German industrialists reached the devastating conclusion that the war against Russia was "no longer winnable," because Germany lacked the resources to prevail in a sustained struggle. When they reported this to Hitler, he dismissed their judgment, preferring to convince himself that the imminent addition of Japan to the Axis would alter the balance of power in Germany's favor. "But the November diary of army chief of staff Franz Halder records other remarks by Hitler that acknowledge the implausibility of absolute triumph...Whatever the prowess of the Wehrmacht, [and regardless of what Hitler chose to believe] the nation lacked the means to win; it could aspire only to force its enemies to parley, together or severally." [Hastings, p.160-61]

Many more months elapsed before the Allies saw that the tide of war had turned. In 1942, rejuvenated German armies would again enjoy spectacular success in new spring offensives against the Soviets in Stalingrad and the Crimea - as well as against the British in North Africa. "But it is a critical historical reality that senior functionaries of the third Reich realized as early as December 1941 that military victory had become unattainable, because Barbarossa had failed, and Russia remained undefeated. [Hastings, p.160-61]

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