

Accounting for Hitler's decision to invade the Soviet Union in 1941

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MATTHEW KINGHORN, JUN 22 2011

Within his work on Operation Barbarossa, Koch states that 'the origins of the German invasion of Russia' remain importantly 'at the centre of historical debate'. A potential reason for this is the highly contentious roots of the decision to invade Russia in 1941; what exactly motivated Hitler to initiate an invasion that would inevitably result in Germany having to fight a war on two unsustainable fronts? It appears that underlining the majority of thought dedicated to the question of invasion was a concern for the economic situation of Germany, especially in relation to south-eastern Europe. In order to continue to conduct a respectable war, raw materials and agricultural products that were located in Russia and the 'successor states', such as vital ores, grain and the oil exports of Romania in particular, had to be acquired. Out of fear of blockade by the Western powers, Germany would have had very little choice but to consider the already prosperous trade agreements between itself and the USSR void, in its hope's that invasion would allow it to access a greater range of resource it needs, and also to protect its already existing assets. Supplementing this decision were extremely suspicious Soviet troop movements close to the start date of Operation Barbarossa, that may have finally provoked Hitler into finally initiating the invasion that he had been planning potentially as early as 1938 to 1939.

It was unquestionably clear that a grand economic plan for the German advance would require the occupation of Russian lands and in particular the Ukraine. In a meeting of the State Secretaries in 1941, it was declared that 'the war can only be continued if the whole of the Wehrmacht is fed from Russia'. Whilst H. W. Koch states that 'all the evidence goes to show that no plan for an operation against Russia existed in the autumn of 1939, nor had any order been issued to draw one up', it is clear that the mindset of the Fuhrer was beginning to turn towards what could be gained economically by a Russian invasion. Hitler had already declared in 1939 to the League of Nations commissioner in Danzig that the land in the east was required so his army was not 'starved out'. Indeed, Noakes and Pridham claim that Hitler appeared to 'have been moving in the direction of an attack on Russia' as early as the winter of 1938 to 1939, at least mentally. It would seem that even two to three years before the invasion, the motive to sustain Germany's military force through seizing economic assets still spearheaded the thinking behind Operation Barbarossa, even if no cohesive military strategy had been formulated in order to do so. Although the USSR was only an incomplete occupation, after the invasion Germany was levying 281.2 million Reichsmarks worth of foodstuffs from the Soviet Union in 1942, the largest out of all enemy countries bar France which was only exporting 40 million more. France's capital and major areas were already being leveraged however as a result of its defeat, which never became the case for the USSR. It is clear that Soviet territory was being targeted as a primary food resource for Germany, as Hitler and the State Secretaries had planned potentially as early as 1938. It is this policy that formed a significant amount of German interest in Russia, and especially what the Soviet Union referred to as an 'obsession with a German strike into the Ukraine'.

But what of more industrial materials that would also be required for warfare? Prior to Operation Barbarossa, it is difficult to deny that Germany would have seen the potential behind Russia to be a significant source of wartime materials. Whilst German-Soviet bilateral trade had amounted to only 61 million Reichsmarks in 1939, by 1940 it had increased to 600 million and rose to 425 million in the first half of 1941 alone. It is questionable whether it was simply a coincidence that Germany chose to invade the Soviet Union at this precise point in time, when it was beginning to openly demonstrate its significant economic value in terms of military resources. The 1940 trade between the USSR

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and Germany included large amounts of raw materials required for war being sent to the Reich, as well as agricultural products; 900,000 tons of petroleum, 500,000 tons of iron ore, and 100,000 tons of each manganese and chromium ore were exported from Russia, and on the very brink of war these 'were to be increased' even higher to nearly 1 million tons of oil and 200,000 tons of manganese. Newnham is right to suggest that the huge benefits these raw material trade agreements would have brought to the German war effort should have acted as a 'large factor in making a German attack on Russia virtually impossible'. However, with the fear of an economic blockade accompanying the campaign in the West, an invasion of the Soviet Union in order to acquire a stable source of necessary materials would have begun to emerge as the most rational option, considering the amount of materials it was already providing. As Newnham states, 'after the summer of 1940 [Russia] was the most important supplier of raw materials to the German Reich, which was isolated by blockade'. A situation developed wherein there was a desperate 'need for Germany to gain access to Russian raw materials in the increasingly probable event of an economic blockade' through invasion. The only method for removing worries concerning a possible cut off of supplies was to use the East to 'supply...grain, cattle, coal, lead and zinc' as Hitler stated to his military commanders. It is this policy that would have caused the decision to make 'all available forces' become 'concentrated on the main operations in the southern sector' of the USSR to 'secure the Caucasian oilfields' in late 1942, as Directive No. 41 had ordered. Economic priorities were evidently at the heart of German military movements.

The drive of economic needs behind the German war effort in Russia was only increased when Hitler recognised possible Soviet disruption in the 'successor states', which too tied in with the overall important economic aims. The Soviet Union began annexing the Baltic states of Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia in June and July 1940 before the invasion, and he also requested territory from Romania. These actions, according to Noakes and Pridham 'caused concern in Germany', possibly enough concern to push Hitler more towards the idea of a war with Russia, which as previously explored had already been present in his mind one or two years. The Baltic region was 'the source and transport route of valuable metals needed for the coming war effort' to Germany, and Russian annexation of the Baltic states would provide complications in terms of acquiring the raw materials the military needed to function in a war against Russia itself. In order to avoid supply lines to Germany being choked, invading Russia before it consolidated its sphere of interest in the Balkans would be imperative. Furthermore, Hitler was 'worried about the possibility of Soviet action against Romania which would threaten German oil supplies'. Whilst the Nazi-Soviet Pact had 'recognized Bessarabia as belonging to the Russian sphere of influence' which it hastily occupied in 1940, it is apparent that the 'suddenness of this move was much resented in Berlin', and would have caused concerns with regards to how eager the Russians were to push into Romania. Before the outbreak of war, Romania had developed into Germany's main foreign supplier of oil, importing 2.8 million barrels in 1938 which had only increased to 13 million barrels by 1941. This being considered, the prospect of Russian activity 'in Rumania, as well as the radical sovietization of the Baltic states' made Hitler's mindset towards a Russian invasion 'very pensive' according to Gerd R. Ueberschär. In the words of Presseisen, it would have been 'not unnatural for Hitler to be concerned', especially considering the 'intense diplomatic activity in southeastern Europe' that followed the events of 1940 in Romania. Whilst Newnham claims that 'it seems clear that it was only the extreme nature of Hitler's objectives- the conquest and depopulation of the Slavic lands to the east of Germany' that caused Hitler to invade Russia, it is highly evident that economic pretences greatly underlined Hitler's thinking towards the successor states, and indeed Russia and the Ukraine.

However, according to Koch there exists a 'controversy as to what influence Russian troop movements in 1940/41 may have had upon the genesis of 'Operation Barbarossa' and Hitler's decision to attack the Soviet Union'. Before the invasion in 1941, the German command allegedly believed that 'Soviet troops were well equipped and prepared' for war. And to a certain extent this was true; the Soviet Union 'possessed a thriving military industry, a large, modern army and a people who seemed united behind their charismatic leader' in the words of Higham. Not only was the presence of a strong Soviet military force overbearing, but prior to the invasion Soviet troop movements would have suggested that Russia may have been preparing to attempt a move against Germany primarily. General N.I. Biryukov, then commanding 186th Rifle Division claimed that 9 days before the German invasion, 'all the divisions in the Ural Military District' were instructed to 'move to the western frontier' in secret. Viktor Suvorov, a former member of the Soviet General Staff, also states within his work 'the whole Ural Military District, including the commander, his staff, and all the subordinate formations, secretly began to move westwards', and that this was also the case within other districts as Westward movements started 'simultaneously taking place in all the internal military districts of the

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Soviet Union' before the German invasion actually came into fruition. With a significant amount of Soviet troops dwindling on the frontier between Germany and Russia, it would be hard to see why the German military leadership would not be contemplating an initial move against Russia, particularly considering the possible downsides of losing the element of surprise against a prominent Soviet force. If the decision to invade the Soviet Union to secure economic assets was already a firm possibility, these suspicious Soviet troop movements only 9 days before Barbarossa was initiated can only have acted as the final catalyst to bring about the events that were to follow in the several days to come.

It is therefore indisputable that economic incentives, including those within the 'successor states', primarily drove forward the concept of Operation Barbarossa. Most importantly, without securing the import passageways in the Baltic region, and also Germany's oil interests in Romania, it would be sure to lose the war as its military force would become choked of its resources required to operate. In addition, Russia had previously demonstrated to Germany that it could be a huge source of the raw materials required to build a military force through its previous trade exports to German lands, which only became more prominent as the date of Operation Barbarossa drew closer. Due to the prospect of economic blockade by the Western powers, the trade agreements of the Nazi-Soviet pact would have ceased to be substantial enough; the full potential of Russian land to create an army had to be tapped through its occupation. However raw materials were not the only economic asset at the centre of the issue- agricultural products were required in order to sustain the German people and army throughout the war. German interest focused hugely upon the Soviet Union, and especially Ukraine, as a source of agricultural produce which had already been targeted by Hitler as the prime location of 'lebensraum' because of this very fact. The amount of foodstuffs Germany begun to levy from these area's as soon as it had occupied the land only reinforced the fact that the German wartime economic plan had been intently waiting to access the agricultural land of the Soviet Union; a plan potentially constructed as early as 1938 within the high military command of the German army. If these economic temptations had not fully pushed Germany into a war with Russia by 1941, the mysterious movements of well armed Soviet troops westward towards German territory just days before Operation Barbarossa was initiated would have acted as the final provocative for invasion.

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