

The Kiev Encirclement: Hitler's Great Gamble

By David March

Stumbling Colossus

In the summer of 1941 the Soviet Army was the largest ground force in the world, with more tanks and aircraft than any other and a strength of 4.8 million split among some 300 divisions and smaller separate units. That huge size was, however, overshadowed by recent poor showings in a series of conflicts in which the Soviets had, at least initially, been embarrassed by their failures and had only finally won through the use of overwhelming force. In Poland, Finland and Mongolia, it had only been the size of the Soviet forces committed that eventually led to victory.

Further, the results of Stalin's officer purges were well known to the global community. As a result, most believed the Red Army would be unable to fight successfully against any major opponent.

Training was also inadequate, and vehicle maintenance almost nonexistent. When the Germans first invaded, nearly half of all Soviet tanks

in the border districts broke down on their way to the fighting. Even more importantly, of the nearly 24,000 tanks in the inventory, fewer than 2,000 were of the new KV and T-34 models.

Radios had been deliberately kept in short supply, with preference given to what was perceived as more secure land-line communications. Worse still, headquarters staffs capable of operating wireless radio equipment were in even shorter supply.

The officer purges hadn't just killed individuals, they had also choked off all tactical and strategic discourse among the survivors. The idea of a modern combined armed force, as pioneered by Marshal Nikolayevich Tukhachevsky, had to be considered anathema once the purge had made him its most prominent victim.

By the late spring of 1941, only two things held out the promise of bringing about changes for the better within the Soviet armed forces. The first was the heavy losses and long delays

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A column of AGS troops inside the USSR shortly after the beginning of the campaign.





A group of junior Soviet officers confer in the field as to their best course of action in getting out of the pocket.

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sustained in the aforementioned low-intensity border wars. The second and more powerful catalyst was the stunning German conquest of France and Low Countries the previous summer, which was taken as clearly showing the ascendancy of their tactics, operations and strategy.

Objective Moscow

“Operation Barbarossa” became the official codename for the overall German offensive into Russia, but—in as much as it could be said to have been a grand plan—it was actually a compromise joining of different schemes originally offered by the *Oberkommando des Heeres* (OKH or High Command of the Army) and the *Oberkommando des Wehrmacht* (OKW or Supreme Command of the Armed Forces). That first headquarters was the traditional command summit of the army, while the latter was an organization created by Hitler to advise him personally on strategy and serve as his command staff.

OKH believed the Soviet Army could best be defeated within the western border areas of Russia, which would then allow for a breakthrough



A German light artillery unit sets up above the Dniepre River early in September.

that would continue all the way to Moscow. Seizure of that capital would then signal the final defeat the Soviet Union and end the entire war in the east. The core idea was classically “Napoleonic,” in that OKH believed quickly engaging and demolishing the Red Army in the field would lead to total victory. Hitler (and by extension OKW) took a different

view: he believed a country’s true military power was best gauged by its economic infrastructure, and that the best way to fully defeat an enemy was by depriving him of that resource.

The result, after considerable debate, was Operation Barbarossa, with three separate army groups

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Southwest Front Order of Battle, 3 September 1941

Reserves (Separate units directly subordinate to Front HQ)

- 1st, 2nd, 66th & 86th Motorized Engineer Battalions
- 3rd Airborne Corps (5th, 6th & 12th Airborne Brigades)
- 3rd & 4th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Divisions
- 3rd, 4th, 6th, 13th, 15th & 17th Fortified Regions (dug-in rifle division equivalents)
- 5th, 10th, 12th, 13th, 15th, 25th, 30th, 31st & 32nd Pontoon Bridge Battalions
- 12th & 14th Engineer Battalions
- 20th, 25th, 29th, 75th, 307th & 386th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalions
- 81st Rifle Division
- 85th Anti-Tank Artillery Battalion
- 99th Rifle Division
- 129th Tank Brigade
- 187th Sapper Battalion
- 197th, 754th & 756th Anti-Tank Artillery Regiments

- 233rd Artillery Regiment
- 376th & 506th Howitzer Regiments
- A & B Flamethrower Battalions
- Ostersky, Kanev & Kiev Anti-Aircraft Artillery Brigades (static)

Fifth Army

- 1st Airborne Corps
- 1st Anti-Tank Brigade
- 5th Fortified Region
- 9th Mechanized Corps (20th & 35th Tank Divisions)
- 11th Pontoon Bridge Battalion
- 15th Armored Train
- 15th Rifle Corps (45th & 62nd Rifle Divisions)
- 22nd Mechanized Corps (19th & 41st Tanks Divisions)
- 23rd, 243rd, 263rd Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalions
- 31st Rifle Corps (193rd, 195th & 200th Rifle Divisions)
- 117th Motorized Engineer Battalion
- 131st Rifle Division
- 147th Sapper Battalion
- 152nd Tank Battalion

- 212th, 331st, 589th Howitzer Regiments
- 215th Motorized Rifle Division
- 231st, 368th, 458th, 460th & 543rd Artillery Regiments

Twenty-First Army (originally with Bryansk Front, but got caught in the pocket)

- 5th & 6th Mortar Battalions
- 6th Armored Train
- 18th Tank Regiment
- 20th Motorcycle Regiment
- 21st Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion
- 23rd Engineer Battalion
- 28th Rifle Corps (117th, 187th & 219th Rifle Divisions)
- 66th Rifle Corps (55th, 75th, 232nd & 266th Rifle Divisions)
- 67th Rifle Corps (24th, 42nd & 277th Rifle Divisions)
- Cavalry Group (32nd, 43rd & 47th Cavalry Divisions)
- 214th Airborne Brigade
- 266th Sapper Battalion
- 435th Artillery Regiment

Twenty-Sixth Army

- 6th Rifle Corps (HQ only)
- 7th Motorized Rifle Division
- 8th Fortified Region
- 15th Motorized Rifle Regiment
- 17th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion
- 37th Motorcycle Regiment
- 37th Pontoon Bridge Battalion
- 41st, 159th, 199th, 227th, 264th, 289th, 301st Rifle Divisions
- 57th, 60th & 91st Tank Battalions
- 65th & 119th Motorized Engineer Battalions
- 186th Anti-Tank Artillery Regiment
- 195th Sapper Battalion
- 209th & 229th Artillery Regiments
- 669th Light Artillery Regiment (from 228th Rifle Division)

Thirty-Seventh Army

- 1st Fortified Region
- 3rd Motorcycle Battalion
- 8th Sapper Battalion
- 13th Motorized Pontoon Bridge Battalion

- 27th & 64th Rifle Corps (HQs only)
- 28th Mountain Rifle Division
- 45th Anti-Tank Artillery Battalion
- 48th Engineer Battalion
- 63rd Tank Battalion
- 87th, 124th, 146th, 147th, 165th, 171st, 175th, 206th, 228th, 284th, & 285th Rifle Divisions
- 120th Motorized Engineer Battalion
- 135th, 272nd & 377th Artillery Regiments
- 538th Howitzer Regiment

Thirty-Eighth Army

- 5th Cavalry Corps (3rd, 14th & 34th Cavalry Divisions)
- 6th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion
- 21st Motorcycle Regiment
- 28th Pontoon Bridge Battalion
- 37th Cavalry Division
- 45th Motorized Engineer Battalion
- 56th Engineer Battalion
- 89th & 94th Tank Battalions
- 97th, 116th, 196th, 212th, 297th, 300th, 304th Rifle Divisions
- 277th Sapper Battalion

- 441st, 445th & 555th Artillery Regiments
- 558th Anti-Tank Artillery Regiment
- Poltava Tank School Consolidated Rifle Regiment

Fortieth Army

(escaped being pocketed)

- 2nd Airborne Corps (2nd, 3rd & 4th Airborne Brigades)
- 5th Anti-Tank Brigade
- 10th, 53rd, 55th, & 65th Tank Battalions
- 21st Artillery Regiment
- 135th & 293rd Rifle Divisions
- 205th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion
- 286th Sapper Battalion
- 595th, 738th, & 760th Anti-Tank Artillery Regiments
- 1042nd Rifle Regiment (detached from 295th Rifle Division) ★

