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978-1-107-03512-6 - Operation Typhoon: Hitler's March on Moscow, October 1941

David Stahel

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

The launch of Operation Typhoon heralded the opening of one of the biggest German offensives of World War II. Indeed, it is surpassed in scale only by the German operations to invade France and the Low Countries in May 1940 (Case Yellow) and the Soviet Union itself in June 1941 (Operation Barbarossa). Although the fighting on the eastern front is arguably best known for Hitler's 1942 offensive to reach and conquer the oil fields of southern Russia (Case Blue), culminating in the battle for Stalingrad, Army Group South's 1942 summer offensive involved only half the number of German troops employed for Operation Typhoon. Likewise, the German summer offensive at Kursk in July 1943 saw some three-quarters of a million German troops engaged, which also falls well short of Typhoon's proportions. While the German operations to invade France and the Soviet Union were sizeably larger in scale (each involving the commitment of more than three million German troops), command in the field was split between three theatre commanders. Operation Typhoon, on the other hand, was directed by Field Marshal Fedor von Bock alone, making it the largest German field command of the war, with almost two million men taking orders from a single commander.

At the start of October 1941 Germany's war against the Soviet Union had been in progress for more than three months. They were by far the bloodiest three months of Hitler's war to date with 185,000 Germans dead<sup>1</sup> and many times that number of Soviet soldiers killed.<sup>2</sup> Hitler was desperately seeking an end to his war in the east, and to achieve this he and his generals settled on a plan for a massive new

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offensive in the centre of the front to seize Moscow. In order to achieve this, Army Group Centre, the largest of the three German army groups on the eastern front, was reinforced to some 1.9 million German soldiers and would engage the 1.25 million Soviet troops of the Reserve, Western and Briansk Fronts. The resulting battles at Viaz'ma and Briansk were to become some of the largest in Germany's four-year war against the Soviet Union. The new German offensive, codenamed Operation Typhoon, aimed to tear a massive hole in the centre of the Soviet front, eliminate the bulk of the Red Army before Moscow, seize control of the Soviet capital and force an end to major operations on the eastern front before the onset of winter. For this purpose the Army High Command (Oberkommando des Heeres – OKH), which directed operations on the eastern front, ordered a major reorganisation of the *Ostheer* (Eastern Army) to provide forces for the new offensive. Army Group Centre was to receive the highest concentration of panzer, motorised and infantry divisions ever assembled by Nazi Germany. In total Bock's army group took command of seventy-five divisions, which included some forty-seven infantry and fourteen panzer divisions. On 2 October, Operation Typhoon's designated start date,<sup>3</sup> more than 1,500 panzers and 1,000 aircraft would combine for a new blitz-style offensive that was intended to overwhelm the Soviet front and allow a rapid exploitation into the Soviet rear. Not surprisingly, engaging more than a million Soviet troops would necessitate battles of immense scale, and there could be no guarantees of the outcome. Even victory on the battlefield would by no means lead to an end of hostilities. As the Germans had seen time and again since June 1941 there was a wide gulf between operational success and strategic triumph. Operation Typhoon could not be just another extension of the German front netting another bag of Soviet prisoners; the operation had to create the conditions for a definitive victory in the east and, accordingly, the OKH concentrated everything it could spare for one vast final offensive.

If there is one aspect to Germany's war which I have sought to illuminate in my previous books,<sup>4</sup> it is the difficulties that were involved in the invasion of the Soviet Union. Far from waging a seamless blitzkrieg wreaking havoc on the Red Army, the German panzer groups in the conduct of their advance suffered debilitating losses, which, in the first three months of the campaign, had already undercut Germany's whole war effort. Yet the wide disparity in opposing losses between the Wehrmacht and the Red Army blinded the German command to

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anything but the most optimistic assessments of the war. As Germany's propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, noted on 3 October: 'On the opposing side there is an optimism regarding the military developments on the eastern front, which is utterly inexplicable.'<sup>5</sup> However, General Wilhelm Groener, who helped direct the German occupation of Ukraine in 1918, had warned against precisely such complacency when campaigning in the east. According to Groener: 'Anyone who wants to grasp the strategic nature of the eastern theatre of war must not overlook historical recollections. Beside the gate of the vast lowland between the Vistula and the Urals, which is the home of one state and one people, stands the warning figure of Napoleon, whose fate should implant in anyone who attacks Russia a sense of horror and foreboding.'<sup>6</sup> Historical parallels were one thing, but in the darkest days of October 1941, when Stalin confronted the prospect of losing the Soviet capital, Marshal Georgi Zhukov remained adamant that the Red Army could outdo even Alexander I in 1812 and defend Moscow against foreign seizure. Nor was Zhukov just telling Stalin what he wanted to hear. The Soviet dictator was clearly agitated and emphasised his desire for the truth in whatever form that might take. As Zhukov recounted Stalin's questioning: 'Are you sure that we will hold Moscow? I ask you about this with a pain in my soul. Tell me truthfully, as a communist.' Zhukov's answer was blunt and unequivocal, which was altogether in line with his uncompromising nature. 'We will, without fail, hold Moscow.'<sup>7</sup> Of course, Zhukov's assurance was by no means infallible, and Moscow continued to be confronted by a very clear and present danger, but Zhukov had one considerable advantage. As he had already learned in his defence of Leningrad, to beat the Germans he did not have to destroy an enemy force or advance his front to a distant objective; in the autumn of 1941 he needed only to prevent the Germans from obtaining their prize and thereby secure a victory by default. This was of course no straightforward task, but with the entire Moscow region rapidly transforming into a fortified military district Bock was always going to face a bloody battle, and time was not on his side in the worsening autumn conditions.

The one thing that did count overwhelmingly in Bock's favour was the professionalism of his forces. In 1941 the Wehrmacht was second to none and there was little immediate pressure which Britain could exert on Germany to help counter the blow Bock was about to deliver.<sup>8</sup> Yet, as Army Group Centre experienced at Minsk, Smolensk and Kiev, even

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successful offensives could prove remarkably costly, and none of these battles had induced the much sought-after peace dividend or capitulation from the Soviet government. Meanwhile, the longer the war lasted the more eroded the elite German panzer forces became and the more the front settled down into static positional warfare. Operation Typhoon was therefore a final effort aimed at breaking the looming danger of a stalemate and avoiding the uncertainty of a winter campaign. Capturing Moscow and ending the war in the east was always going to be a tall order, and yet, more than at any other time in 1941, the strategic situation in mid October convinced the German high command that they were set for victory against the Soviet Union. Even the Soviet government was planning for the loss of Moscow and nominated a new capital some 800 kilometres further east. Thus, for all the difficulties of the panzer groups, Hitler's new October offensive appeared to reinvigorate Germany's war in the east and, in the view of the German command, brought the *Ostheer* closer than ever to outright victory.

There can be no question that Bock's reinforced army group constituted a potent force at the beginning of October but, for all the power concentrated in the centre of the eastern front, Germany's Typhoon was on course to hit Russia's own weather storm, the so-called *rasputitsa*.<sup>9</sup> Throughout the summer, even periodic downpours had played havoc with German supply and transportation, forcing brief pauses in German operations. Now, however, the Germans were to encounter something entirely new. The strangling mud of the *rasputitsa* not only confronted Bock's motorised columns with an unprecedented topographical challenge, but also denied his panzer forces their much prized 'shock' and rapid manoeuvre. Yet, while the seasonal difficulties in the autumn period are the best-known impediment to Bock's autumn offensive, they were by no means the only one. Indeed, German military files make clear that the *rasputitsa* accounts for only part of the difficulties Operation Typhoon would confront and that alone it would most likely not have stopped the German offensive from maintaining its advance, albeit at a slower pace. The fact was that even after the initial battles at Viaz'ma and Bryansk, Army Group Centre was still bitterly opposed by Soviet forces on the Mozhaisk line, around Kalinin and on the approaches to Tula. The road to Moscow was never open and the Red Army was never absent. Clearly, therefore, the *rasputitsa* was not the only factor which stood in the way of the German high command's plans in October 1941.

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For all that Bock was able to array against the Soviet capital and for all the professionalism of his forces, on the opposing side the Soviets met the Germans with fanatical levels of determination and their trademark resilience in the face of daunting odds. The few western observers who experienced the war from within Moscow gained a sense of the totality with which the Soviet regime approached the battle. As the BBC correspondent Alexander Werth noted:

All the military talent – discovered and tested in the first battles of the war and, in some cases, before that in the Far East – was assembled, all available reserves were thrown into battle, including some crack divisions from Central Asia and the Far East, a measure made possible by the non-aggression pact concluded with the Japanese in 1939.<sup>10</sup>

Whatever bad memories and reservations the generals may have had, Stalin had become the indispensable unifying factor in the *patrie-en-danger* atmosphere of October–November 1941.<sup>11</sup>

The American journalist Henry Cassidy also took account of the historic events underway and concluded that the battle for Moscow would be hard fought. Recalling his experiences in the Soviet capital during the heady days of October 1941 Cassidy wrote: ‘Every newspaper man who witnesses a momentous occasion of this kind tries to think of the one phrase which tells the full, thrilling story in a few words, the “lead” to the dispatch. While I was watching the Germans occupy Paris, I was tormented for days by such a search, even though I could send nothing. The best I could do was: “Paris fell like a lady.” Now, the best I could find was: “Moscow stood up and fought like a man.”’<sup>12</sup> Whatever one may conclude about the Soviet Union’s defeats in 1941, many at the time, including numerous German officers, commented on the remarkable ability of Stalin’s state to take so many losses while at the same time growing the size of the Red Army. Indeed in the two-month period from early October to early December the Soviet high command transferred enough men to the central part of the front to staff no fewer than ninety-nine new divisions.<sup>13</sup> As Cassidy concluded: ‘The Soviet Union made its own miracles.’<sup>14</sup>

Others were already taking their analysis of the emerging Soviet strength to its furthest logical conclusion and predicting not only a German defeat, but in the process a new Soviet empire covering Eastern Europe. A letter by Geoffrey M. Wilson, the third secretary of the British Embassy in Moscow from 1940 to 1942, written between

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30 September and 2 October 1941, set out his fears for the future with uncanny foresight:

There is an alliance of necessity but it doesn't go much beyond that, if at all ... One of my nightmares is that if the Russian armies are eventually successful as I think they will be, they will end this war by marching to Berlin and occupying all points of Europe east. And then how are we going to get them out? ... What it all boils down to is the fact that the Russians are being led to believe that this is primarily their war and that we are quite incidental in it. Up to a point, of course, they are right, in that their sacrifices are much heavier than ours have ever been, but the fact remains that unless there is a change, there is going to be a most unholy row between us when the thing is over, and the final atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust will be far worse at the end than it was two or three years ago.<sup>15</sup>

Clearly the doomsday predictions of Moscow's impending fall and the end of the Soviet Union, which later also framed the events of the autumn for a generation of historians,<sup>16</sup> were not shared by all the participants at the time. Indeed, the view expressed by the German command at the time suggested that Soviet strength was only an illusion: it was a paper-tiger army that boasted a large number of formations with very little real value. This was the reassurance offered by the Army quartermaster-general, Major-General Eduard Wagner, in a letter he wrote on 29 September:

At the same time they count once again, or still, numerous Russian divisions, knowing full well that they can only be rubbish and yet again replenished formations – regiments with a machine gun and untrained replacements. No wonder that we and the troops are impatiently waiting for the moment when [Army Group] Centre can go ahead, which means that everything is finished.<sup>17</sup>

Far from having any concerns at the Red Army's incredible resilience or the contrasting fatigue of the *Ostheer*, it was the German command's unchecked arrogance, even in the face of so much resistance, that propagated its own illusions. Lieutenant-General Friedrich Paulus, the Senior Quartermaster I at the OKH, noted after the war that by the start of the autumn of 1941 it was commonly believed that the Soviet state had been weakened 'to a fatal degree'. Not only this, Paulus

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concluded: 'It was felt therefore that it was still possible, with one more final effort, to achieve our 1941 objectives, albeit somewhat later than was originally envisaged.'<sup>18</sup> Such were the polarising extremes of the eastern campaign in the autumn of 1941 that at the same time, in the same war, well-placed figures were drawing diametrically contrasting conclusions. While the impending defeat of the Soviet Union was contemplated by some, others were already warning of a Soviet empire challenging western interests in a post-war world. Assessing events at the end of October, two of the most prominent historians of the war in the east, David Glantz and Jonathan House, drew this metaphor: 'the Wehrmacht and the Red Army resembled two punch drunk boxers, staying precariously on their feet but rapidly losing the power to hurt each other. Like prizefighters with swollen eyes, they were unable to see their opponents with sufficient clarity to judge their relative endurance.'<sup>19</sup> By assessing Army Group Centre's autumn offensive anew and in greater depth, I hope to penetrate the fog of distortions and gain a better insight into the state of Germany's war in October 1941.

Operation Typhoon proceeded in two phases: the first from 2 October until the end of the month and then, after a short pause while the sunken roads were left to freeze and supplies were brought up, in a subsequent offensive undertaken in the second half of November and running to 5 December. While both offensives are important, they are so for different reasons. One might conclude that the German October offensive is important for the devastating impact it had on the Red Army, while Bock's November offensive is more noteworthy for the dire ramifications it held for the Germans forces themselves. Ultimately, each offensive belongs to Army Group Centre's Operation Typhoon, but they remain separate and distinct. The October fighting included two of Germany's most important battles of World War II and, as they were utterly unprepared for what they were to encounter, the most gruelling conditions the Wehrmacht had faced so far. Such events have typically been condensed into the wider narrative of the German autumn offensive but, with Army Group Centre attacking with three panzer groups and nearly two million men, the events would seem to demand more comprehensive treatment. Indeed, it is often only by digging deeper into the records that we are able to question standard interpretations, while giving a voice to commanders and war diaries seemingly too lowly or insignificant for more superficial histories. Accordingly, this book will

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look at the month of October with another book to follow and take on the subsequent operations from November to early December.

As with my past books, the focus here will be on the panzer and motorised formations, which made up the cutting edge of Army Group Centre's offensive operations. My research utilises war diaries, daily orders and battle reports from the command staff at Army Group Centre as well as each of the three panzer groups, most of the available panzer corps and panzer divisions. Widespread use has also been made of wartime diaries and private correspondence among Army Group Centre's commanders and men at the front. The hope is to reflect the experience of war from both ends of the spectrum. Although I do not exclude the Soviet side of the fighting my focus is predominantly on the German experience of the war. I will start my study with a certain historical contextualisation of the Russian and Soviet theatre of war and how this has impacted centuries of military engagements prior to 1941. The attempt is to direct greater attention to the environment in which Russian wars have been fought and consider how this later departed from or reinforced the operational problems of the more technically advanced Wehrmacht.

While this study is preceded by two previous volumes dealing with German operations through Belarus and central Russia and into Ukraine, no prior knowledge of those campaigns and battles is assumed for the current study. Bock's order of battle changed significantly for the autumn offensive with the addition of Colonel-General Erich Hoepner's Panzer Group 4 (transferred from Army Group North) as well as Lieutenant-General Werner Kempf's XXXXVIII Panzer Corps<sup>20</sup> (transferred from Panzer Group 1). There was also an additional infantry corps and a security division (transferred from the Sixth Army and Army Group South's rear area) as well as two full panzer divisions newly deployed to the east for Operation Typhoon. In total Bock's strength rose by more than 600,000 men, which made his force nearly 50 per cent stronger than on 22 June 1941 (the first day of the war).<sup>21</sup> Bock now stood at the head of the largest military force Nazi Germany would ever assemble under one commander. His task, however, was equally demanding. As one of Bock's soldiers wrote shortly before the offensive began, Operation Typhoon would have to 'crack the nut' and, observing the forces assembled around him, he concluded, 'it will be some crack'.<sup>22</sup>

# 1 CONTEXTUALISING BARBAROSSA

## Hunting the Bear – campaigning in the Russian theatre

While there are countless conceptual topics of relevance to our understanding of Germany's war in the east, Carl von Clausewitz's (1780–1831) interpretation of 'the country' (or countryside) as a strategic factor in the conduct of war is probably the most efficient method of linking many related problems inherent to Hitler's *Ostheer* in 1941. 'The country' is dealt with in *On War*'s Book I, 'On the Nature of War'. Clausewitz writes:

The country – its physical features and population – is more than just the source of all armed forces proper; it is in itself an integral element among the factors at work in war – though only that part which is the actual theatre of operations or has a notable influence on it.

It is possible, no doubt, to use all mobile fighting forces simultaneously; but with fortresses, rivers, mountains, inhabitants, and so forth, that cannot be done; not, in short, with the country as a whole, unless it is so small that the opening action of the war completely engulfs it ...

In many cases, the proportion of the means of resistance that cannot immediately be brought to bear is much higher than might at first be thought. Even when great strength had been expended on the first decision and the balance has been upset, equilibrium can be restored.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to remember that any discussion of these problems cannot be rendered valid or invalid based simply on any particular

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historical example; after all, even if Clausewitz is correct, there may well be exceptions to the rule. In other words, simply applying Clausewitz to the German experiences in 1941 is not enough to show a pattern of experience which proves or disproves the problems of the Russian theatre. Thus, in order to gain a more dependable sample, a measure of historical digression is required.

In 1632 Patriarch Filaret, the de facto ruler<sup>2</sup> of Muscovy,<sup>3</sup> started what subsequently became known as 'the Smolensk War' (1632–1634) against the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Filaret amassed a large army and in October drove it towards his objective at Smolensk. The resulting siege was long and ultimately unsuccessful, resulting in defeat for Muscovy and forcing the vanquished Russians to cede a number of towns as well as pay a substantial war indemnity. In the early seventeenth century the new Romanov dynasty, which would eventually take Russia to great-power status, was still in its infant years. The Smolensk War was its first large-scale attempt at warfare against a foreign power, but it floundered because Muscovy could neither deliver a rapid, knock-out blow nor sustain a longer campaign against the mobilised forces of King Wladyslaw IV's kingdom. According to William C. Fuller Jr, Muscovy's failure was not, however, due to the usual explanation of its backwardness and lack of modern means. On the contrary, Muscovy's military command, technology, tactics and operations were all on a par with their Polish-Lithuanian opponents. Instead, Fuller highlights what he calls 'endurance' factors as the real cause of Muscovy's defeat. This pertains to matters of logistics and transport; finance; training; and reinforcement. The east European theatre simply demanded much more from an army in the field. The increased distances meant longer campaigns, adding to monetary costs and placing extraordinary demands on the ability to sustain an army in the field. A lack of supplies in turn affected the health of the men and horses, making constant reinforcements necessary.

In the seventeenth century the vast spaces of the east had a much lower population density, all but preventing the west European practice of armies living off the land. Moreover, Muscovy's lands were not very fertile, so yields remained low. Transportation on the basic road system was largely limited to the warmer months, rendering a major military expedition in October inexpedient, especially with the addition of heavy siege guns. While Patriarch Filaret had built up a large war chest for the campaign, the absence of a standing army meant