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Russia's Weather and 7 Other Things You Should Know About WWII's Eastern Front

Joseph Stalin disregarded early warnings of the German attack.

Germany's invasion of Russia was the largest surprise attack in military history, but according to most sources, it shouldn't have come as a surprise at all. While the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany had signed a famous non-aggression pact in August 1939, many anticipated that Adolf Hitler had designs on attacking the Russians—whom he viewed as an inferior race—as soon as the time was right. Nevertheless, Stalin appeared blind to the Nazi leader's true intentions. In the months before the German advance, he brushed off dozens of reports from Soviet spies warning that an invasion was imminent. He also accepted Hitler's cover story that the sudden presence of German troops on the Soviet border was merely a move to keep them out of range of British bomb strikes, and even ordered his troops to not fire on German spy planes despite numerous "accidental" invasions of Soviet airspace. Stalin's puzzling trust in the Third Reich was finally dashed on June 22, 1941, when the Germans launched Operation Barbarossa and invaded the Soviet Union with more than three million men.

Most people believed Germany would quickly crush the Soviet Union.

Operation Barbarossa was intended to deal a total defeat to the Soviets in only three to six months, but in the early days of the invasion, many thought the fall might come even sooner. German troops killed or wounded 150,000 Soviets in the first week of the campaign, while the Luftwaffe—the Nazi air force—destroyed over 2,000 Russian planes in just the first two days. As German tanks and troops swarmed through Soviet territory in a three-pronged attack, most outside analysts began predicting that a Russian defeat was only weeks or even days away. Despite these early setbacks, the Soviets' seemingly inexhaustible supply of troops ultimately proved too much for the Germans to overcome. While the invaders succeeded in knocking several million Russian soldiers out of the war by November 1941, they had also suffered more than 700,000 casualties of their own. Following a series of ferocious counterattacks by the Soviets, the Nazis were forced to abandon all hope of a swift victory. The war would drag on for another three and a half years.

Russian women served in front line combat roles.

Soviet-era Communism tended to embrace the equality of the sexes, and perhaps nowhere was this more apparent than in the Russian attitude toward female soldiers. Nearly one million Soviet women took up arms and served on the front lines of World War II as anti-aircraft gunners, snipers, partisan guerillas and even fighter pilots. More than simply providing the Red Army with an unanticipated boost in numbers, female troops eventually earned a reputation as some of the fiercest fighters on the Eastern Front. Among others, ace pilots Lydia Litvyak and Yekaterina Budanova each downed around a dozen German planes, and sharpshooter Lyudmila Pavlichenko singlehandedly killed more than 300 enemy soldiers. Anxious to prove their worth in combat, women regularly signed up for some of the most hazardous combat positions. For example, one of the most feared Soviet units was an all-female regiment of dive-bombers known as the "Night Witches," who flew sluggish biplanes on nighttime bombing raids behind German lines.

Stalin ordered Soviet forces to fight to the last man.

After seeing millions of Soviet troops captured in the early days of the German blitzkrieg, Joseph Stalin issued August 1941's "Order No. 270," which proclaimed that any troops who surrendered or allowed themselves to be captured were traitors in the eyes of the law and would

be executed if they ever returned to Russia. The dictator later upped the ante with July 1942's famous "Order No. 227," better known as the "Not One Step Backward!" rule, which decreed that cowards were to be "liquidated on the spot." Under this order, any troops who retreated were to be shelled or gunned down by so-called "blocking detachments"—special units who were positioned behind their own lines and charged with shooting any soldier who tried to flee. Stalin's draconian orders were designed to increase the Red Army's fighting spirit, but they weren't empty threats. According to some estimates, Soviet barrier troops may have killed as many as 150,000 of their own men over the course of the war, including some 15,000 during the Battle of Stalingrad.

It included the largest tank battle in military history.

The Eastern Front is best known for the multi-year Siege of Leningrad and the bloody Battle of Stalingrad, but it was also the site of the largest armored confrontation of all time. During July 1943's Battle of Kursk, some 6,000 tanks, 2 million men and 5,000 aircraft clashed in one of the most strategically important engagements of World War II. The campaign began when the Germans set their sights on a 70-mile-long salient, or bulge, in the Soviet lines in western Russia. Hitler delayed the attack by several weeks to allow the Nazis' new Tiger tanks to reach the front, which gave the Soviets time to fortify the entire region. When the German offensive finally commenced, they were met by a storm of mines and artillery fire that eventually destroyed hundreds of tanks and left a total of some 350,000 men dead on both sides. Unable to match the Soviets in a contest of attrition, the Germans reluctantly withdrew from the region on July 13. The retreat marked the last gasp of Nazi offensive operations in the East. Both sides engaged in large-scale atrocities and war crimes.

The struggle for the Eastern Front was bigger and costlier than the fighting in the West, but it was also significantly more brutal. Both sides flouted international law and practiced institutionalized acts of cruelty against enemy troops, prisoners and civilians. The Germans wiped out scores of villages during their advance through Russia, and Jews and other minorities were regularly rounded up and shot or poisoned in mobile gassing vans. Other cities were looted or starved into submission, most famously Leningrad, where as many as one million civilians may have perished during a 28-month siege. The Red Army responded by giving no quarter during the Soviet push to Berlin in 1945, when hundred of thousands of German civilians were shot, burned alive in buildings, crushed by tanks and even crucified. According to some studies, Soviet troops may have also been responsible for the rape of some two million German women during the last days of the war.

The last German POWs weren't released from the Soviet Union until 1956.

While the western Allies released their final World War II prisoners in 1948, many German POWs in the U.S.S.R. were kept under lock and key for several more years. Most were used as slave labor in copper or coal mines, and anywhere between 400,000 and one million eventually died while in Russian custody. Some 20,000 former soldiers were still in Soviet hands at the time of Stalin's death in 1953, and the last 10,000 didn't get their freedom until 1955 and 1956—a full decade after the war had ended.

Geography in History

"THE TIDE TURNS!"

Hitler and "General Winter"

In Unit 6 you read how Napoleon conquered much of Europe during the early 1800s. In the 1930s another conqueror began to overrun Europe—Adolf Hitler, the Nazi leader of Germany. Like Napoleon, Hitler tried to invade the Soviet Union. The fierce Russian climate that you read about in the Unit 6 Geography in History lesson in your textbook proved an unbeatable enemy for Hitler as well.

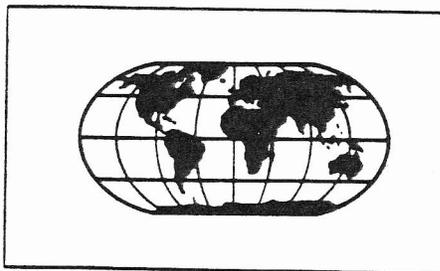
Adolf Hitler's goal was no less ambitious than Napoleon's. Hitler wanted to expand the power of Germany until he controlled all of Europe. His invasions of Austria, then Czechoslovakia, and, finally, Poland ignited World War II. After conquering almost all of Europe, Hitler turned and attacked the Soviet Union.

Before attacking the Soviet Union, Hitler first studied the features of the country that had made Napoleon's invasion difficult. Hitler's armies would have to cross the same vast plains and dense forests, huge swamps and mile-wide rivers both in hot summer and bitter cold winter. Time after time he told his generals he would not suffer the same defeat as "a certain other famous man," namely, Napoleon.

As Hitler saw it, Napoleon's biggest mistake came in thinking that he could win all of Russia by capturing Moscow. Instead, Hitler would concentrate on other goals that had to do with the geography of the Soviet Union. He would take the most populated and most prosperous land, the western and southwestern lands that produced nearly 40 percent of the country's food. He would also win control of the Soviet Union's iron and coal supplies. Key industrial areas would become his.

Furthermore, he would capture the oilfields at Baku in the south that supplied 90 percent of the Soviet Union's oil. Only when these objectives were met would he attack Moscow.

Inadequate supplies and climate were the other reasons for Napoleon's failure. Hitler planned to use the Soviet railroads to keep supplies moving. As for beating "General Winter," as one observer called the Russian cold, Hitler's plan was simple: to strike the Soviet Union so quickly that the war would be over before the cold set in. Modern tanks and trucks moved faster than Napoleon's horses and wagons, Hitler reasoned. He would also start his invasion a full month before Napoleon had—or so he hoped.



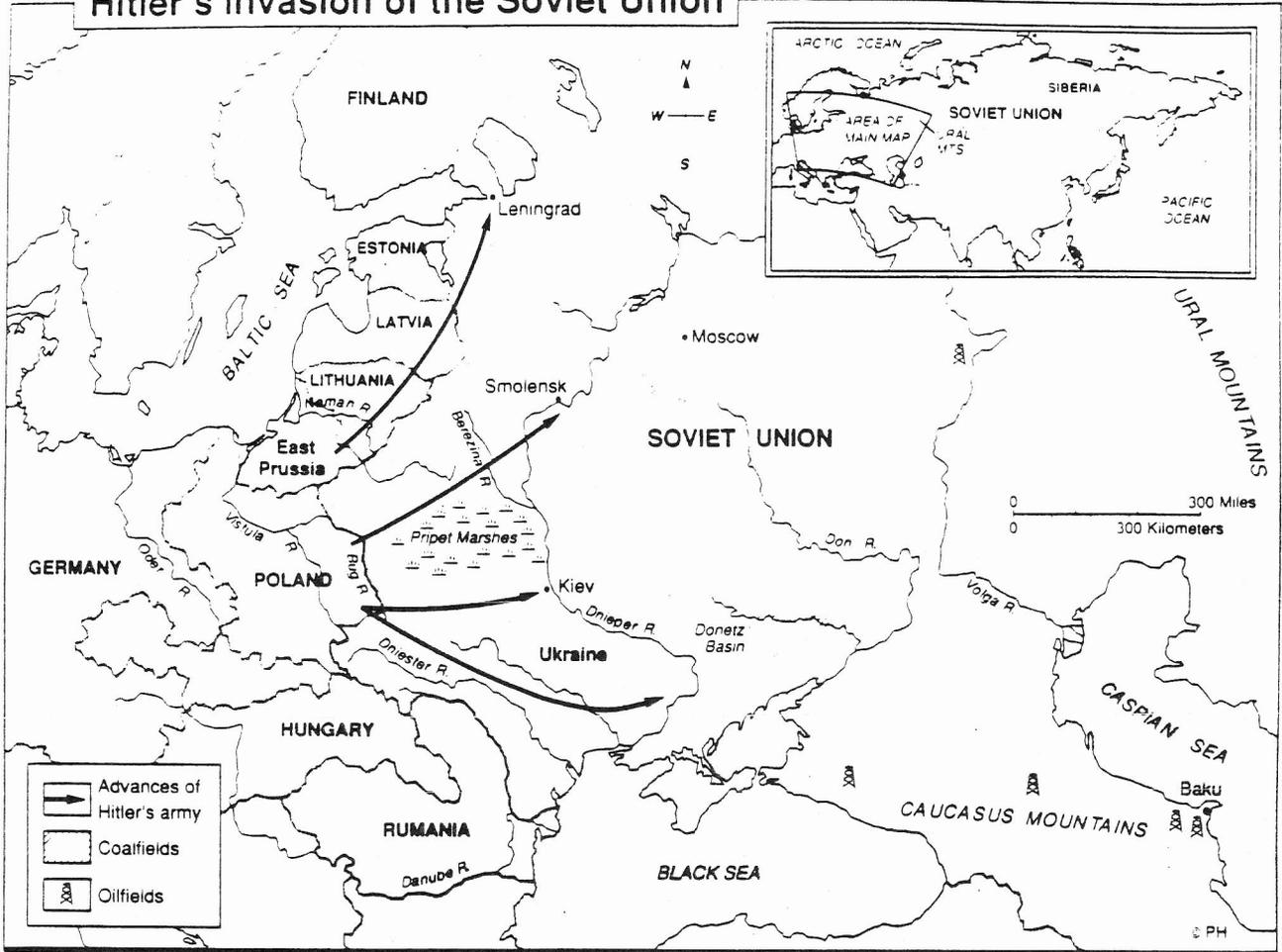
Fatal Delays

As it happened, however, a wet spring and battles elsewhere in Europe delayed Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union. On June 22, 1941, nearly the very day Napoleon had crossed the Niemen River into Russia almost 230 years before, Hitler's forces poured over the Soviet border. Like Napoleon's army, Hitler's was the largest invasion force ever assembled up to that time. Some 3 million soldiers were supported by 3,580 armored vehicles and 600,000 transport vehicles. These millions were spread

UNIT 6

**Geography in History,
continued**

Hitler's Invasion of the Soviet Union



out over a front stretching 1,800 miles from the Arctic Ocean to the Black Sea. A thousand bombers, protected by 800 fighter planes, pounded Soviet airfields, while 7,000 heavy guns knocked out border forts.

After the first three weeks of the invasion, the German army had achieved many of its objectives. One army group had slashed across Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, and surrounded Leningrad. Another had pushed to Smolensk, 440 miles deep in European Russia. A third group, however, had shown signs that it would need help capturing the coalfields and industries of the Donets Basin and Kiev, the capital of the rich grain lands of the Ukraine.

On August 22, as the German army pre-

pared for its push into Moscow, Hitler ordered his generals to turn back to the Ukraine. Only after Kiev was taken, on September 26, could Hitler be persuaded to strike at Moscow. By then, however, good weather was ending.

Finally, almost the entire German army was ordered to attack Moscow. In a matter of days, German columns had marched nearly 150 miles towards Moscow. Then, in early October, the autumn rains began. These rains were the heaviest in memory, many Russians claimed. The unpaved roads became tracks of mud in which trucks stuck fast. Soon 150,000 trucks were lost, many actually torn apart by efforts to free them. Snow began to alternate with rain. The German offensive came to a dead halt for

Geography in History, continued

two weeks. "Our wildest dreams have been washed out by rain and snow," a German officer wrote in his diary.

"General Winter" Calls a Retreat

Napoleon had been fooled by an unusually long, dry autumn. Hitler was caught off guard by an unusually early, bitter winter. The first frost came November 3. At first the chill seemed an advantage, allowing the attackers to roll forward again on now-frozen roads. But nine days later the temperature plunged to 5° F. By December 5 it had fallen to -35° F.

Although German tanks had pushed to the outskirts of Moscow, the assault had to be called off, for now "General Winter" had taken command. Airplane, tank, and truck engines froze solid. For hour after hour crews fed precious gasoline to fires under the motors, trying to thaw them out. Since antifreeze was in short supply, many engines cracked completely and became unusable. Tank turrets stuck, rifles and ammunition failed to fire, gunsights frosted over. Supply trains, trains built for Germany's warmer climate, froze even as they raced down the tracks. Soldiers fell too. In the first three months of winter, over 112,000 Germans were killed or injured by the cold.

Time and again during the year before, Hitler had questioned the army staff about winter clothing for the troops. Finally, to put his mind at rest, they had shown him a dozen sets of winter gear. Now Hitler discovered that those 12 winter suits were the only ones the army had. In the end, some divisions of the army received as few as 16 overcoats to share among 800 men. Without coats, warm boots, and gloves, no one could survive long in temperatures that dropped as low as -52° F.

The Soviets Strike Back

Conditions worsened for the Germans as the Soviets retreated. When winter clothing became available, it could not be delivered to the front because the railway supply system

on which Hitler depended was in chaos. It had been badly damaged by retreating Soviets. They had wrecked switches, train cars, water towers, and bridges, and had pulled up mile after mile of train tracks. Not only that, crops, whole villages, and forests were burned to prevent the Germans from using them. Horses were shot, trucks smashed, roads and abandoned cities booby-trapped.

Furthermore, the Soviet retreat was not the kind Napoleon had encountered in 1812. After an initial retreat, the Soviets began to fight back against Hitler's forces. Although the Soviets had seen many of their soldiers captured or killed, they were still a nation of 190 million. They had lost 18,000 tanks and 14,000 airplanes; but they moved factories from Moscow piece by piece and set them up east of the Urals. There they made more and better equipment.

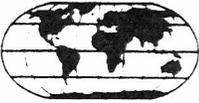
As for the cold, the Soviets felt it too. But they had good winter clothing. Special oils kept their guns and tank engines operating. They fought close to their source of supplies. On the day the Germans gave up their offensive, the Russians counterattacked. Fresh troops from frigid Siberia led the way. For these men, subzero temperatures were a part of daily life.

For the first time in the war, Hitler's troops gave up ground. Hitler saw what was happening. "The Napoleonic retreat is threatening to come true," he warned. He ordered his men to stand fast. His generals protested, but he refused to listen. He had learned at least one lesson from Napoleon: retreat during the Russian winter meant disaster. The army stayed, but suffered terribly. A million Germans had been killed or wounded by the end of February, 1942. However, the greater part of the German army had survived the winter.

For two more years, the Germans and Soviets fought. Finally, in 1944, the Soviets pushed the Germans out of the Soviet Union. Although many soldiers had fought against his armies, Hitler, like Napoleon, blamed one in particular for stopping his triumph in the Soviet Union: "General Winter."

Name _____

Date _____ Class _____



UNIT 6

**Geography
in History**

A. Focus on Geography

1. Place

What geographical features of the Soviet Union made invasion difficult for both Napoleon and Hitler?

2. Location

a. Look at the map on page 26. What major rivers and marshes blocked the way from Poland to Moscow?

b. Were the Germans nearer to Moscow once they reached Leningrad or after they took Smolensk? Explain.

3. Interaction

How did the Russians change the environment to slow the Germans?

4. Movement

Why did Hitler believe he could complete his invasion faster than Napoleon?

5. Regions

What regions of the Soviet Union interested Hitler most and why?

B. Critical Thinking

Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

- 1. Making Comparisons.** How did Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union differ from Napoleon's?
- 2. Checking Consistency.** Was Hitler's decision to attack Moscow after capturing Kiev consistent with his determination not to repeat Napoleon's mistakes? Why or why not?
- 3. Perceiving Cause and Effect Relationships.** Why do you think the Soviets moved their factories beyond the Ural mountains?