

Directive No. 21: Operation Barbarossa (December 18, 1940)

Abstract

The subjugation of Poland within four weeks was the prelude to Hitler's campaign of conquest throughout Europe. In a series of blitzkrieg offensives, German forces quickly occupied the Benelux states, Denmark, Norway, and France. Hitler's plan for a reordering of the continent under German hegemony—a plan that envisaged the incorporation of large parts of Western Europe and some sections of Poland into the Reich—seemed to be becoming a reality. In the meantime, Stalin had begun appropriating as much Eastern European territory as he possibly could without precipitating a break with Hitler. Thus, he annexed Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia in August, along with Bessarabia and parts of Finland. But while Stalin was taking advantage of this opportunity to expand his sphere of power, Hitler was preparing to crush his Russian ally. After the defeat of France and the withdrawal of British troops from the European continent, Hitler believed the time was right for a historic confrontation with the Bolshevik archenemy. On December 18, 1940, he issued "Directive No. 21: Operation Barbarossa" to the leadership of the Wehrmacht, giving the order to prepare for an offensive war against the Soviet Union the following year.

Source

Directive No. 21: Operation Barbarossa

The German Wehrmacht must be prepared to *crush Soviet Russia in a quick campaign* (Operation *Barbarossa*) even before the conclusion of the war against England.

For this purpose the *Army* will have to employ all available units, with the limitation that the occupied territories must be secured against surprises.

For the *Luftwaffe* it will be a matter of releasing such strong forces for the eastern campaign in support of the *Army* that a quick completion of ground operations can be counted on and that damage to eastern German territory by enemy air attacks will be as slight as possible. This concentration of the main effort in the East is limited by the requirement that the entire combat and armament area dominated by us must remain adequately protected against enemy air attacks and that offensive operations against England, particularly against her supply lines, must not be permitted to break down.

The main effort of the *Navy* will remain unequivocally directed against England even during an eastern campaign.

I shall order the *concentration* against Soviet Russia possibly 8 weeks before the intended beginning of operations.

Preparations requiring more time to get under way are to be started now—if this has not yet been done—and are to be completed by May 15, 1941.

It is of decisive importance, however, that the intention to attack does not become discernible.

The preparations of the High Commands are to be made on the following basis:

I. General Intention:

The mass of the Russian *Army* in western Russia is to be destroyed in daring operations, by mobilizing wide tank wedges, and the retreat of units capable of combat into the vastness of Russian territory is to be prevented.

In quick pursuit a line is then to be achieved from which the Russian Air Force will no longer be able to attack the territory of the German Reich. The ultimate objective of the operation is to establish a cover against Asiatic Russia from the Volga-Archangelsk line. Then, in case of necessity, the last industrial area left to Russia in the Urals can be eliminated by the Luftwaffe.

In the course of these operations, the Russian *Baltic Sea Fleet* will quickly lose its bases and thus will no longer be able to fight.

Effective intervention by the Russian *Air Force* is to be prevented by powerful blows at the very beginning of the operation.

II. Probable Allies and Their Tasks:

1. The active participation of *Romania* and *Finland* in the war against Soviet Russia is to be expected on the wings of our operation.

The High Command will in due time arrange and determine in what form the armed forces of the two countries will be placed under German command at the time of their intervention.

2. It will be the task of *Romania* to support with select forces the attack of the German southern wing, at least in its beginnings; to pin the enemy down where German forces are not committed; and otherwise, to render auxiliary service in the rear area.

3. *Finland* will cover the concentration of the German *North Group* (parts of the XXI Group) withdrawing from Norway and will operate jointly with it. Besides, Finland will be assigned the task of eliminating Hangö.

4. It may be expected that *Swedish* railroads and highways will be available for the concentration of the German North Group, from the start of operations at the latest.

[...]

IV. All orders to be issued by the Commanders in Chief on the basis of this directive must clearly indicate that they are *precautionary measures* for the possibility that Russia should change her present attitude toward us. The number of officers to be assigned to the preparatory work at an early date is to be kept as small as possible; additional personnel should be briefed as late as possible and only to the extent required for the activity of each individual. Otherwise, there is danger that most serious political and military disadvantages may arise through the discovery of our preparations—whose date of execution has not yet even been determined.

[...]

Source of English translation: "Führer's Directive" (December 18, 1940). In United States Department of State, *Documents on German Foreign Policy: From the Archives of the German Foreign Ministry*. Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1957–1964. Series D (1939–1945), The War

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Source of original German text: “Führerweisung” (18. Dezember 1940). In *Akten zur Deutschen Auswärtigen Politik 1918–1945*. Bonn: Gebrüder Hermes KG, 1964. Serie D (1937–1945). Band XI, 2: Die Kriegsjahre. Vierter Band, Zweite Halbband, 13. November 1940 bis 31. Januar 1941. Dokumentnummer 532, pp. 750–53.

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