Directives for the Treatment of Political Commissars ("Commissar Order") (June 6, 1941)

Abstract

That Hitler did not see the pending invasion of Russia as a conventional war of territorial conquest was clear, not least from the following "Commissar Order" of June 6, 1941. As early as the 1920s, Hitler had identified the Soviet Union as the Bolshevist command center of the alleged Jewish world conspiracy. His intention now was to crush this supposed racial-ideological archenemy of the German *Volk* through a war of annihilation that would involve the extermination of the Jews as well as the decimation and enslavement of "inferior" Slavic peoples. The following order, the so-called Commissar Order, which instructed the German military leadership—in clear violation of international law—to engage in the systematic persecution and murder of Soviet political commissars, sealed the cooperation of the Wehrmacht with the annihilation campaign of the SS. Hitler's formal repeal of the order on March 6, 1942—partly an attempt to accommodate the opposition of some military commanders —did not change anything about the way Germany conducted war during "Operation Barbarossa."

Source

Führer's Headquarters, 6 June 1941

High Command of the Armed Forces
WFSt. (Armed Forces Operational Staff) Department L (IV Q) (Intelligence)
No 44822/41
Top Secret!
For General Officers only!

In addition to the Führer's decree of 14 May regarding Military jurisdiction in the "Barbarossa" zone (Supreme Command of the Armed Forces/Armed Forces Operational Staff/Department L (IV Q) (Intelligence) No 44718/41, (Top Secret, For General Officers Only), the enclosed "directives for the treatment of political commissars" are being transmitted herewith:

You are requested to limit the distribution to Commanders in Chief of Armies or of Air Commands, respectively, and to inform the Junior Commanders by word of mouth.

The Chief of the Supreme Command
Of the Armed Forces
By Order.

Signed: Warlimont

****

Enclosure to Supreme Command of the Armed Forces/Department L IV Q (Intelligence)
No. 44822/41
Top Secret
For General Officers Only.

Directives for the Treatment of Political Commissars

When fighting Bolshevism, one cannot count on the enemy acting in accordance with the principles of humanity or International Law. In particular, it must be expected that the treatment of our prisoners by political commissars of all types, who are the true pillars of resistance, will be cruel, inhuman, and dictated by hate.

The troops must realize:

1.) That in this fight it is wrong to trust such elements with clemency and consideration in accordance with International Law. They are a menace to our own safety and to the rapid pacification of the conquered territories.

2.) That political commissars are the originators of the Asiatic-barbaric fighting methods.They must be dealt with promptly and with the utmost severity.

Therefore, if taken while fighting or offering resistance they must, on principle, be shot immediately.

For the rest, the following instructions will apply:

I. Theatre of Operations

1) Political commissars who oppose our troops will be dealt with in accordance with the "decree concerning jurisdiction in the 'Barbarossa' area." This applies to commissars of any type and position, even if they are only suspected of resistance, sabotage, or instigation thereto.

Reference is made to "Directives on the Behavior of Troops in Russia."

2) Political commissars, in their capacity as officials attached to enemy troops, are recognizable by their special insignia—a red star with an inwoven golden hammer and sickle on the sleeves—[…]. They are to be segregated at once, i.e., while still on the battlefield, from the prisoners of war. This is necessary in order to deprive them of any possibility of influencing the captured soldiers. Those commissars will not be recognized as soldiers; the protection granted to prisoners of war in accordance with International Law will not apply to them. After having been segregated they are to be dealt with.

3) Political commissars who are not guilty of any hostile act or are not suspected of such will remain unmolested for the time being. Only in the course of a deeper penetration into the country will it be possible to decide whether they are, or should be handed over to, the *Sonderkommandos.* The latter should preferably scrutinize these cases themselves.

As a matter of principle, when deliberating the question of "guilty or not guilty," the personal impression received of the commissar's outlook and attitude should be considered of greater importance than the facts of the case, which may not be decisive.

4) In cases 1) and 2) a brief report (report form) on the incident is to be submitted:

a) to the Division (Ic) (Field Intelligence Officer) by troops subordinated to a Division.
b) to the Corps Command or other respective Commands, as follows (Ic) by troops directly subordinated to a Corps Command, an Army High Command or the Command or an Army group, or Armored Group.

5) None of the abovementioned measures must delay the progress of operations. Combat troops should therefore refrain from systematic rounding-up and cleansing measures.

II. In the Rear Areas

Commissars arrested in the rear area on account of doubtful behavior are to be handed over to the

Einsatzgruppe or the *Einsatzkommandos* of the SS Security Service (SD) respectively.

III. Restriction with regard to Court Martials and Summary Courts

The Court Martials and Summary Courts of regimental and other commanders must not be entrusted with carrying out the measures as under I and II.

Distribution:

Sector Staff Silesia	1st copy
Army Group B	2nd copy
Sector Staff East Prussia	3rd copy
High Command 16th Army	4th copy
Sub-sector East Prussia I	5th copy
Fortress Staff Blaurock	6th copy
High Command 4th Army	7th copy
Sector Staff Staufen	8th copy
Labor Staff Gotzmann	9th copy
High Command 11th Army	10th copy
High Command 2nd Army	11th copy
Chief Construction Group South	12th copy
Fortress Staff 49	13th copy
Fortress Staff Wegener	14th copy
Armored Group 4	15th copy
High Command of Army in Norway	16th copy
Army High Command/ Adjutants Office / Army C.i.C.	17th copy
Army High Command/ Adjutants Office / Army General Staff	18th copy
Army High Command/ Department / Foreign Armies East	19th copy
Army High Command/ Operational Section (without OKW decree)	20th copy
Army High Command/ Quartermaster-General (without OKW decree)	21st copy
In reserve	Copies 22–30

Source of English translation: Directives for the Treatment of Political Commissars [Commissar Order] (June 6, 1941), U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD, Nuremberg Trial, National Archives Record Group 238m, Entry 175, Box 27, NOKW-1076. Edited by GHI staff.

Source of original German text: Richtlinien für die Behandlung politischer Kommissare [Kommissarbefehl] (6. Juni 1941), U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD, Nuremberg Trial, National Archives Record Group 238m, Entry 175, Box 27, NOKW-1076.

Recommended Citation: Directives for the Treatment of Political Commissars (“Commissar Order”) (June 6, 1941), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/nazi-germany-1933-1945/ghdi:document-1548> [March 16, 2026].