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THE UNKNOWN EASTERN FRONT

THE WEHRMACHT AND
HITLER'S FOREIGN SOLDIERS

ROLF-DIETER MÜLLER

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I.B. TAURIS

LONDON · NEW YORK

Published in 2012 by I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd
6 Salem Road, London W2 4BU
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010
www.ibtauris.com

Distributed in the United States and Canada Exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010

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ISBN: 978 1 78076 072 8

A full CIP record for this book is available from the British Library
A full CIP record is available from the Library of Congress

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: available

Printed and bound in Sweden by ScandBook AB

The translation of this work was funded by Geisteswissenschaften International – Translation Funding for Humanities and Social Sciences from Germany, a joint initiative of the Fritz Thyssen Foundation, the German Federal Foreign Office, the collecting society VG WORT and the Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels (German Publishers & Booksellers Association).

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The maps were drawn by Christopher Volle using material at the Military History Research Institute (MGFA) in Potsdam.

Abbreviations

ADAP	Akten zur deutschen auswärtigen Politik [Documents on German Foreign Policy]
ARMIR	Armata Italiana in Russia [Italian Army in Russia]
BA-MA	Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv [Federal Military Archives, Freiburg]
CP(B)	Communist Party (Bolsheviki)
CSIR	Corpo di Spedizione Italiano in Russia [Italian Expeditionary Corps in Russia]
DEV	División Española de Voluntarios [Spanish Volunteer Division]
DNSAP	Danmarks Nationalsocialistiske Arbejderparti [National Socialist Workers' Party of Denmark]
LAF	Lietuvių aktyvistų frontas [Lithuanian Activist Front]
LVF	Légion des Volontaires Français contre le Bolchevisme [Legion of French Volunteers against Bolshevism]
MG	machine gun
NKVD	Narodny kommissariat vnutrennykh del (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, USSR)
NOC	Nederlandse Oostcampagnie [Dutch East Company]
NSB	Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging [National Socialist Movement in the Netherlands]
NSDAP	Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei [National Socialist German Workers' Party (Nazi Party)]
OKH	Oberkommando des Heeres [Army High Command]
OKW	Oberkommando der Wehrmacht [Wehrmacht High Command]
OUN-B	Orhanizatsiya Ukrayins'kykh Natsionalistiv [Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists] ('Bandera faction')

OUN-M	Orhanizatsiya Ukrayins'kykh Natsionalistiv [Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists] ('Melnik faction')
ROA	Russkaya Osvoboditel'naya Armiya [Russian Liberation Army]
RONA	Russkaya Osvoboditel'naya Narodnaya Armiya [Russian National Liberation Army]
SA	Sturmabteilung (stormtroopers or 'brownshirts')
SS	Schutzstaffel (elite party troops)
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
UPA	Ukrayns'ka Povstans'ka Armiya [Ukrainian Insurgent Army]
USA	United States of America
VNV	Vlaamsch Nationaal Verbond [Flemish National Union]

Preface

The opening of Russian archives in the early 1990s stirred the hopes of many historians, military historians included. Admittedly, there were no sensational discoveries. For Western historians at least, the key revelations merely confirmed what most knew already. That Stalin had claimed all of East-Central Europe for himself in a secret protocol with Hitler in 1939–40, and that in early 1940, near Katyn, he had ordered the murder of Polish officers taken as prisoners of war could now be read by former Soviet citizens in the files of their highest-ranking leaders. Meanwhile, the most important secret files from the Soviet era in Moscow are long since under wraps again or hard to access. A real surprise, on the other hand – insightful for historians of Germany as well – is the development of a new national historiography in the Baltic states, Poland and Ukraine. The new approach in these countries has cast a completely different light on life under German occupation during World War II and under the pressures of two successive waves of Stalinization (1939–40 and 1944–5). These nations' fight for independence did not come to a standstill during this period, but was carried on in a fatal alliance with Hitler's Germany, even after German defeat.

For Stalin, these were criminal activities by treasonous Soviet citizens. The term 'collaboration' had already acquired a negative connotation among the anti-Hitler coalition during World War II. The image of homegrown fascists, mercenaries and traitors has continued to hold in Western scholarship and was thoroughly cultivated for half a century by Soviet historical propaganda. The new national historiography of the last 20 years in East-Central Europe, however, has drawn a more nuanced picture, obliging us to say goodbye to a number of longstanding clichés. Only recently did intense riots break out in Estonia when a Soviet victory monument was relocated. For the majority of Estonians, the Red Army was an occupying force rather than a 'liberator',

whereas the country's Russian minority still clings to the myth of the 'Great Patriotic War'. In commenting on the controversy, Russian President Vladimir Putin said he would not stand for any attempt to rewrite the history of World War II.

And yet it seems inevitable the dam will break. Thus, for example, in 2007 a Museum of Soviet Occupation was set up in Kiev – the second of its kind after Riga – and the 100th birthday of the former commander-in-chief of the anti-Soviet Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) in World War II, Roman Shukhevych, was honoured with an exhibition. In many cities, commemorative ceremonies led to counter-demonstrations and a strong police presence. French President Charles de Gaulle is routinely cited as chief witness to the power of these Ukrainian nationalists and sometime Wehrmacht collaborators, having supposedly uttered (before taking office) that never would a German soldier have set foot on French soil had France had an army as committed as the UPA.¹

Discussions like these should be reason enough to recapitulate these changing perspectives and ask ourselves if we have not been harbouring a much too biased view of the German-Soviet war. What part did local helpers play in Hitler's 'Crusade against Bolshevism', and what factors led them to do so?

Many historical accounts of the war in the East, the bloodiest struggle in world history, overlook the role of local helpers and thereby unwittingly play up to Stalinist propaganda. They also underestimate the importance of German-allied armies fighting on the Eastern Front, thus supporting Hitler's claims that his allies had ultimately failed him miserably and left him in the lurch, that they were military failures and a burden to the German Eastern divisions. In Hungary and Romania, these 'forgotten sons' were not rediscovered until after the fall of Communism in 1989. Up until then, the history of Hitler's allied armies on the Eastern Front had been taboo. In Fascist Italy, another ally, there does exist a vast postwar veteran literature, but even today the history of the Italian Army in Russia is hampered by biased accounts dealing primarily with the *Resistenza* and tending to view Italian soldiers as victims.

Hitler's opinion of a third group – foreign volunteers from Western and Northern Europe – was not as harsh, but this tiny group of individuals came from nations and states that Hitler likewise despised for the most part. The 'Germanic' volunteers may have been highly regarded by the SS but were

ultimately just more ‘cannon fodder’ for the Eastern Front, and were viewed in their homelands as traitors and fascists. Not until the spring of 2007 did the Norwegian government commission an extensive research project to investigate the fate of its erstwhile combatants on the Eastern Front.

All three groups have generally been dealt with separately in specialized literature, balanced scholarly approaches being the exception rather than the rule. Many publications in Germany as well as in the Western homelands of these foreign volunteers – lately even in Russia – tend to glorify these helpers, some even adopting Nazi slogans. The theme of volunteers for the ‘Crusade against Bolshevism’ is standard fare among German and European right-wing radicals, a Fascist International still very much active.

This overview is the first attempt to describe and acknowledge the overall phenomenon of foreigners on the side of the Wehrmacht fighting against the Red Army. The differences between individual countries and groups lend themselves to a systematic approach, allowing readers to search for specific information without losing the overall context or a comparative perspective. Eye-witness reports and excerpts from important documents illustrate and deepen a previously neglected chapter in the history of World War II.

Introduction

Operation Barbarossa and Its Consequences

It was the most startling coup in world history.¹ News of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact fell like a bombshell. Had not the 'Brown' dictator, whose aggressive foreign policy put Europe on the verge of a second major war in a generation, always claimed that his Third Reich was necessary to save Europe from Bolshevism? And had not the 'Red' dictator portrayed himself since 1935 as a bulwark against fascism and its spread across the Continent? British and French military officers had engaged in protracted negotiations in the summer of 1939 over an alliance with Moscow to prevent the advance of the Nazis. Yet Stalin proved to be a wily tactician. His Red Army was not fully operational after the purges, the Soviet dictator having had almost his entire higher officer corps murdered to consolidate his absolute power. Hitler, by contrast, had to contend with an experienced and self-confident General Staff, and was surprised to find that his generals were less than enthusiastic about a large-scale war at that point in time. Some of them, in secret, even entertained thoughts of a *coup d'état*.

Stalin used the opportunity of discussing a new trade agreement to signal his interest in reaching a political accord with Hitler. Berlin saw the chance to break the Western Powers' policy of containment and was prepared to pay any price to do so. So both dictators discovered a long-standing German-Russian tradition: the obliteration of Polish freedom. Their mutual eagerness to annex the country through a fourth partition and wipe it off the map for good made Poland's worst nightmare reality. For Stalin it meant restoring the old borders of the Russian Empire, including Finland, the Baltic states and territories in eastern Romania. Hitler pursued his own strategic aims:

the expansion of his eastern perimeter so that after dealing with the Western Powers he could crush his rival in the East. Added to this was the exploitation of Poland's resources. Cheap labour, raw materials and grain were to relieve an economy overheated by rearmament and help overcome the wearying British blockade.

Hitler had just celebrated his 50th birthday. He now pushed his generals into action, wanting to see the birth of the 'Greater Germanic Reich of the German Nation' and world supremacy of the 'Germanic master race' in his lifetime. The sober-minded Soviet leader, on the other hand, was in no hurry with his World Revolution. Hitler was the first to invade Poland, accepting the Western Powers' declaration of war. Stalin chose to bide his time until it was clear that the French would stay put behind their Maginot Line. Then he set his own troops in motion, breaking the Polish army's back. The Western Powers grudgingly listened to the propaganda version of an alleged act of liberation and accepted the USSR's mock-neutrality. Open conflict with the two dictators would have meant the end of free Europe.

In Soviet-occupied Poland, Stalin's secret police and political functionaries waged a brutal class war. The acts of terror and murder they committed in the ensuing two years were harder on the population than the merciless and ever more intense race war unleashed by the Nazis in their own zone of occupation.² Stalin endeavoured to please Hitler and consolidate their secret alliance. He handed over German communists and Polish Jews to the Gestapo, while his Comintern set to work denouncing France and Great Britain as warmongers. He sacrificed dwindling Soviet stockpiles to make sure Hitler's tanks had fuel, and appeased German workers by putting bread on the table. Stalin financed Hitler's war and hoped to receive state-of-the-art weapons technology in exchange.

The division of the world seemed imminent, albeit not the way Hitler imagined. Though he wanted to teach the British a lesson, they were still entitled as a 'master race' to maintain their supremacy overseas. Hitler's India was Russia. This old idea re-emerged in the summer of 1940, once Germany had overthrown France and chased the British army across the Channel. That Stalin now demanded his share of the spoils and, given the unexpected lightning victories of the Germans, had an eye to his own territorial gains only strengthened Hitler's resolve to make a strategic about-face and look eastward. His generals had since become used to the idea. Though they had recently been hesitant and sceptical, the Führer's brilliant victory had fired

their imaginations. Newly appointed field marshals swore allegiance to the 'Greatest Field Marshal of All Times' (*Grösster Feldherr aller Zeiten*, shortened in common parlance to the mocking acronym *Gröfaz*).

Any misgivings were disregarded in devising secret plans (*Aufbau Ost*) to attack his loyal ally, the Soviet Union. The 'giant on feet of clay', they believed, could be crushed in one fell swoop, thus paving the way once and for all for a 'New Order' in Europe and the world. Great Britain, the only country still putting up a fight, despite German bombs and threats of invasion, would be forced into submission, and the Americans, they assumed, would keep quiet in their isolation.

Preoccupied with his own plans for his western territories, Stalin let himself be hoodwinked. He took warnings about his allies in Berlin to be a feint of British imperialists, who happened to be taking a beating from Hitler. He pressed for a new set of agreements and was not immodest. He did not accept Hitler's dubious offer of South Asia. Negotiations dragged on, but Stalin trusted in the judiciousness of Hitler, who in his programmatic work *Mein Kampf* had acknowledged the foolishness of a two-front war. Economic aid from the Soviets to Germany was intended to keep Hitler's lust for power focused on the British. As long as the Wehrmacht was undefeated, the Red Army did not have a chance anyway, despite its considerable efforts to gird itself for war. Even when invading tiny Finland, Soviet soldiers had nearly made fools of themselves. Why should Stalin pull the chestnuts out of the fire for capitalist great powers?

The Soviet General Staff became increasingly nervous when in the spring of 1941 the Wehrmacht began its clandestine military build-up in the East. From a military perspective, a preventive strike against the German forces amassing in the East would perhaps have staved off the looming threat. But an overconfident Stalin opted against this. Instead, he offered words of encouragement to military academy graduates, telling them at their farewell banquet that they should not always admire and overrate the Wehrmacht, that his officers should return to their troops with assurance. Insufficient training and equipment – undoubtedly a major handicap – played no role in his decision-making.

Warnings from his General Staff mounted in March 1941. Communist master spy Richard Sorge, a German press correspondent in Tokyo, even knew the exact date of the offensive: 22 June. Yet Stalin was notoriously sceptical. He had no interest in becoming involved in the German-British conflict. Time, so he thought, was on his side. An offensive against the powerful

Wehrmacht would have been suicide and utterly foolish, because Hitler could have easily posed as defender of the West, possibly even reaching some kind of compromise with Great Britain after all. Indeed, what was Stalin to think of the mysterious flight of Rudolf Hess, who landed by parachute in Scotland on 10 May? We now know it was an intrigue of the British secret service, having convinced the already somewhat incoherent 'Deputy Führer' that there were circles in Britain willing to reach a peace agreement. Three weeks earlier, the British had inspired a *coup d'état* in Belgrade to deter German military efforts in the Balkans and make Hitler think that Stalin was behind it.

The confusion was settled during the night of 22 June 1941, when Hitler's Eastern Army, the greatest concentration of military strength in German history, attacked unsuspecting Soviet border troops. Stalin had courted Hitler's favour up to the very last minute. When hostilities began, he fled to his dacha, fearing arrest. But the Politburo begged its Comrade Chairman to take the country's defence into his own hands.

Though intensively prepared as a blitzkrieg, Operation Barbarossa remained a gamble. Wehrmacht leaders, however, were ready to go for broke. They had even made logistic preparations to shift their attention to Great Britain once the Eastern campaign was over. And yet the German Eastern Army was poorly equipped and full of gaps. Its numbers were not significantly larger than those of the troops who had taken France a year earlier. Apart from a few dozen elite divisions, the majority of soldiers headed east in the manner of Napoleon's Grande Armée – on foot or by horse and cart. Indeed, the Corsican had actually been faster than General Guderian's tank convoys, which only in December reached the outskirts of Moscow.

Napoleon's army had more foreigners than Frenchmen serving in it, and they were neither despised nor discriminated against. Hitler, on the other hand, overestimating his own capabilities, thought he could largely do without foreign help and the mobilization of his allies. Inducing Japan to open a second front in the Far East against Stalin would have seemed an obvious strategy, but Hitler chose not to. In the European theatre of war, he thought, only the Finns and Romanians at best could be counted on to provide him with flank protection in a planned blitzkrieg of approximately two months. He did not think them capable of more, and was not prepared, for political reasons, to arm his allies any better than they already were. Hitler was unrelenting on this point. He did not want to have to share the spoils, and in his future 'Eastern territory' (*Ostraum*) no one would bear arms but the Germans, lording it over their Slavic

vassals. For this reason it did not even cross his mind in the summer of 1941 to arm Russians or other Eastern European peoples and win them as brothers-in-arms against the Red Army.

It was in this vein that Hitler declared the following in an internal meeting on 31 July 1941: 'No one but a German shall ever be allowed to bear arms! This is of utmost importance; even if it may seem easier at first to mobilize the military support of some foreign subject peoples, it is wrong! Because one day it will backfire, absolutely and inevitably. Only the German may bear arms, not the Slav, not the Czech, not the Cossack nor the Ukrainian!'³ And yet the Führer had to make compromises and concessions from day one, at first for diplomatic-propagandistic and military-tactical reasons (the use of local recruits for defence commandos and as auxiliary police), but more and more due to increasing attrition on the Eastern Front and the unfavourable course of the war. Still, Hitler and his ideological stubbornness remained the biggest hindrance to enlisting the support of foreign volunteers for the Eastern Front despite the varied efforts of the more pragmatic-minded Wehrmacht, the Eastern Ministry (Ostministerium) and ultimately even the self-proclaimed guardians of Nazi racial ideology, the SS, who eventually abandoned their ideological scruples for the sake of recruiting 'cannon fodder'. Hitler's insistence on 'Germanic origins' as a condition for bearing arms was never taken so seriously, at least in the case of his closest allies, the Hungarians, Romanians and Italians.

Despite being outnumbered, Hitler's more experienced troops routed the Red Army in the first four weeks of the campaign. The newly developed blitzkrieg strategy seemed to be working. Stukas bombed key enemy positions, and hordes of tanks broke through the front and encircled enemy formations in daring operations. The Wehrmacht soon marched more than 3 million prisoners of war through the streets, and Stalin had lost practically his entire peacetime army of 5 million men. The Germans had planned to be in Moscow by August. Preparations were under way for a victory parade on Red Square, and Himmler's police had endless arrest lists at their disposal.

Hitler had ordered radical warfare as early as March 1941. Communists and political functionaries were to be shot summarily. Conflicts between the Wehrmacht and the SS – the kind that had arisen during the Polish campaign – were to be avoided from the outset. Whereas army leaders strove for a division of labour so as to concentrate on the 'war of arms' (*Waffenkrieg*), it was clear already in drafting occupation policy that the Wehrmacht would be

deeply entangled in a racially and ideologically motivated war of conquest and extermination. Troops were expected to 'live off the land' in order to free up reinforcements. The death by starvation of 'umpteen millions'⁴ was calculated into the equation quite matter-of-factly. Big cities such as Leningrad and Moscow were not to be occupied but destroyed and flooded, considered as they were to be breeding grounds of Bolshevism, inhabited by 'useless eaters'. Army command gave criminal orders to murder Soviet commissars. And German soldiers complicit in attacks on the civilian populace were no longer invariably tried by court martial.

Many administrative agencies, economic enterprises and university institutes were soon involved in the euphoria of planning and 'reorganization' (*Neuordnung*). Himmler, convinced that the East would belong to the SS, reworked his notorious 'General Plan for the East' for the settlement and Germanization of Eastern Europe. Hitler entrusted him with broadly defined 'special tasks'. Specially formed 'task forces', the so-called *Einsatzkommandos*, were not only responsible for murdering political foes, but, with the help of police and the Waffen SS, were to implement the 'Final Solution to the Jewish Question'. The genocide of Jews was only one task of the units engaged in 'worldview war' (*Weltanschauungskrieg*). The ethnic cleansing or 'land consolidation' (*Flurbereinigung*) of the East also included gypsies, the mentally ill and other 'life unworthy of life', along with the enforcement of a race hierarchy in the East. Millions of Germanic *Wehrbauer*, a free and militarized peasantry, were to form the 'master class' – a prospect officially held out to combatants even at this point in time. There was no lack of applicants, from enlisted men to higher nobility. Determining the hierarchy of Slavic 'auxiliary peoples' (*Hilfsvölker*) – potential work slaves for several generations – was a source of friction in many German administrative offices.

In April 1941, Hitler appointed Alfred Rosenberg, the Party's insipid ideologue, to the position of 'Reich minister for the occupied eastern territories'. His notions of giving preferential treatment to the Baltic peoples and the Ukrainians quickly collided with the actions of Reich commissioners appointed by Hitler to administer the territories. The latter were duty-bound to carry out Göring's goals of exploitation with the greatest brutality. Thus the sympathy Germans had initially enjoyed among parts of the local population was soon lost in the ensuing chaos of occupation policy. Particularly in former Soviet zones of occupation, many people had welcomed the invading Germans as 'liberators' in the hope of regaining their national autonomy.

But the pressures of economic exploitation and, later, the hunt for forced labourers to serve in the Reich drove many of them underground and into the ranks of the partisans.

Stalin's proclamation of the 'Great Patriotic War' on 14 July 1941 initially met with little response in the western USSR. Only NKVD agents and scattered Red Army soldiers organized isolated acts of sabotage in the German hinterland. Unlike in 1812, Russian peasants showed little inclination to fight a foreign occupier this time. Indeed, after the bitter experiences of Stalinism, many of them were prepared to make arrangements with the Germans, especially considering that the German army they had encountered in World War I was anything but a horde of barbarians. Hitler's order to shoot anyone 'who so much as looks suspicious'⁵ resulted in a brutalization of the German 'pacification policy' (*Befriedungspolitik*), which nonetheless failed to fully contain a growing partisan movement. For Stalin, the partisans were particularly important for keeping the population in his German-occupied hinterland under pressure. Partisans killed more Soviet citizens than German soldiers did.

Instead of letting his army fall back into the depths of Russia as in the Napoleonic invasion of 1812, the 'Generalissimo', as Stalin now called himself, ordered fanatical resistance. Generals who allegedly failed in their duties were shot, as were retreating units. Time and again he managed to close up gaps in the front and hold the advancing Germans in check. Stalin, whose survival seemed unlikely to Washington and London, had meanwhile secured some powerful allies. US President Roosevelt, who still had to win the support of his reluctant countrymen for an anti-Hitler coalition, now promised huge amounts of aid. Churchill, too, did everything to get his detested adversary back on his feet. Stalin succeeded – contrary to German expectations – in evacuating a large part of his industry and mobilizing the formidable resources of his country. Behind the smoke screen of a fragile Western Front, he was even preparing strategic reserves for a counter-offensive. He drew these reserves from the Far East, since Japan – encouraged by Hitler – was preparing to attack the United States. Moscow and Tokyo had signed a mutually beneficial neutrality pact in April of 1941.

Two months after the invasion of the Soviet Union began, a feverish nervousness prevailed in the German Supreme Command. The breakthrough to Moscow had still not been achieved, and Hitler was pushing to finally shift the focus of operations to the Ukrainian 'breadbasket' and towards the oil wells of

the Caucasus. In his new, mosquito-infested Führer Headquarters near the East Prussian town of Rastenburg, he paused to write a memorandum, his second since coming to power. He justified his decision to focus for the time being on vital strategic centres in the South, despite the opposition of army commanders. It is clear in retrospect that this doomed his military campaign to failure.

His soldiers marched their feet off in the hope of a swift victory. Guderian's tanks, with their ailing engines, changed course and headed for Kiev, engaging in the biggest battle of encirclement in military history. More than 600,000 Red Army soldiers were captured. The catastrophe, however, gave Stalin time to organize his defence of the capital. He placed his poorly armed workers' battalions at the forefront to give the impression that the Red Army was already down to its last reserves. Meanwhile, his strategic Siberian divisions were on their way. Sorge, the spy, had reported that Japan would uphold its pledge of neutrality.

The worst drama played out in the North. Hitler's troops prepared for the siege of Leningrad, determined to starve out and destroy the 'birthplace' of Soviet Communism and its millions of inhabitants. His Finnish allies, though, only marched to the old river border, the Svir, leaving the Red Army wide access to Leningrad via Lake Ladoga. But Stalin harboured age-old Muscovite suspicions towards the originally quite cosmopolitan city, the former St Petersburg, and for the most part left its starving inhabitants to their own devices. At the end of the war, the leaders of its successful defence were sentenced to death on spurious charges. The Generalissimo, it was clear, would suffer no other heroes beside him.

Stalin's ruthlessly organized defence campaign against the Wehrmacht in 1941 probably saved the Soviet Union from its downfall. Hitler resumed his Moscow offensive, his wearied troops breaking through Soviet lines once again. For a few days in October, Stalin considered fleeing from the Kremlin. But without sufficient reinforcements and equipment the German advance lost speed. Then, with the start of the rainy season in autumn, the *rasputitsa*, or Russian quagmire, effectively hindered any forward movement – a defensive advantage for Stalin. With the onset of frost, Hitler ordered one last-ditch effort to storm the enemy capital and bring the war in the East to a tentative conclusion. Victory, prematurely declared, was long in coming.

Events followed in rapid succession in early December 1941. Hitler's emaciated front units had to halt their offensive because of the snowdrifts. One day later they were hit by a massive counter-offensive. Stalin was ultimately

saved by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, which drew the United States into the war. Hitler, for his part, was seized by a dark presentiment of his inevitable downfall. Plans to annihilate the Jews were ripening, being laid out in detail soon afterwards at the notorious Wannsee Conference. The two dictators duelled it out in a fierce winter battle outside Moscow, a test of strength for Hitler this time. He relieved two dozen generals of their posts to overcome a confidence crisis. (Stalin, in a comparable situation, probably would have had them shot.) With fanatic orders to halt and the quick mobilization of reserves, Hitler managed to gradually stabilize a collapsing front and strengthen the self-assurance of his exhausted troops.

Stalin had been too bold in plotting his counter-offensive and was already making plans for the borders of postwar Europe. The Red Army wore itself out in weeks of heavy winter fighting, its head-on attacks producing nothing in the way of strategic advance. For the first time in the war, Hitler mobilized all his forces. Up until this point he had made sure that ‘peacelike’ conditions prevailed in Germany so as not to endanger morale on the home front. Now his indifference to the future of his people became apparent. Hitler was fighting to extend his own life and to fulfil his political and ideological ambitions – at any cost.

To show his resolve to his helpless generals, Hitler appointed himself supreme commander of the army and took over the planning and execution of the Eastern war. There would be no capitulation or compromise, as the secret opposition hoped for at home. Fritz Todt, chief engineer of the Reich and Reich minister for armaments and munitions, had lost his faith in the *Endsieg*, or ‘final victory’, and urged a political solution. He perished in a mysterious plane crash following an important meeting at the ‘Wolf’s Lair’ Führer Headquarters. Three months earlier, Ernst Udet, the famed World War I fighter pilot responsible for air armament, had lost his life as well, a suicide likewise passed off by Nazi propaganda as a plane crash.

On 8 February 1942, Hitler appointed his senior architect and confidant Albert Speer as the new minister of armaments. Working closely with German industry, Speer was able to streamline armaments production without the interference of the military. His progress reports invariably assured the Führer of glowing military prospects ahead. Thus, Hitler, his confidence growing, focused on a renewed offensive in the East. His *Weltblitzkrieg* had undoubtedly failed, but there was still time to prepare his ‘Fortress Europe’ for defensive action before the Americans intervened.

Hitler knew he was dependent on oil. Aborting his offensive in the south towards the Caucasus and resuming the fight for Moscow at the insistence of his General Staff in September 1941 had presumably been a strategic blunder – one he was not eager to repeat. Hitler pulled together all his available forces in the spring of 1942 to go on the offensive in the Ukraine. He could not do much more, but it was enough to break through the front once again at isolated strategic points. Yet the Red Army – unlike in the previous year – would not be encircled so easily this time. The Germans were looking to the oil fields of the Caucasus – a marching distance of more than 1,000 kilometres from north to south.

The arduous advance to the south opened up a correspondingly wide flank to the east which Hitler safeguarded using his Romanian, Hungarian and Italian allies – a risk he had to take if he wanted to focus on his thrust into the Caucasus. He trusted that Stalin would stand his ground, defending his vital oil wells with all his might. Yet the Russian leader once again proved his farsightedness, skilfully luring his opponent into a trap. Just as Hitler's troops were about to begin their assault on the Caucasus, Stalin built up his position on the Volga. The armaments centre threatened Hitler's flank, but could be held at bay or destroyed with little effort. To the dismay of his generals, however, Hitler ordered his offensive to be split, steering his 6th Army towards Stalingrad.

Though German mountain infantry managed to conquer Mount Elbrus, the highest point in the Caucasus, and enfeebled German forces reached the first oil wells near Maykop, enemy fire and total destruction of the oil rigs prevented German petroleum experts from extracting more than a few tons of the precious resource. And it was still another 700 kilometres to the main wells of Baku. Thus, thirsty German tanks had to continue being supplied through camel caravans. In the steppe landscape of the Don as well, German tanks ran out of fuel, giving Stalingrad's defenders time to entrench themselves in the rubble. Hitler's Stukas had created an ideal fortress, effectively digging a grave for Paulus's 6th Army. The Germans managed to take 90 per cent of the city in gruelling house-to-house fighting – the so-called 'rat war' (*Rattenkrieg*) – and were utterly exhausted by the time Stalin launched his counter-offensive. His tank armies crushed Germany's helpless allied units at the flanks and encircled the 6th Army with its 250,000 men outside Stalingrad. Only several thousand of these men would ultimately escape with their lives. There was no talk in Hitler's Führer Headquarters of the hundreds of thousands of foreign

casualties on the German side – the Romanians, Italians, Hungarians, Slovaks and countless Russian ‘willing helpers’ (*Hilfswillige*) – but at best snide and reproachful remarks about the supposed failure of Hitler’s allies.

The ruin of the 6th Army was a bad omen for the Reich. Hitler had sacrificed his own soldiers to spoil his rival’s triumph. He was furious when he heard that Paulus, freshly promoted to field marshal, had left his bunker and surrendered, instead of shooting himself. That would never happen to him. There are many indications that Hitler had long since abandoned the idea of ‘final victory’ and used the next two years to merely stage his own downfall. He was rightly convinced that he alone could bring his faithless cohorts, especially his generals, under control so as to draw out an obviously senseless war. While others, even high-ranking Nazi officials whom he blindly trusted, were increasingly racked with doubt and secretly sought a way out, Hitler succeeded in holding together his system of rule until the bitter end, dragging out its inevitable collapse by mobilizing ever more forces and radicalizing his strategy of war. Having sacrificed other peoples, he now offered up his own – millions of soldiers and civilians who, like a living wall, served to prolong his own miserable life by a matter of weeks or days.

Hitler was ever more unyielding after Stalingrad, fighting a simple holding action and consenting to evasive manoeuvres in the face of wave-like attacks by the advancing Red Army only after wrangling with his generals, and then for the most part too late. Field Marshal Erich von Manstein proved the most successful strategist in the East in 1943–4; some even hoped Hitler would give him supreme command over the Eastern Front. Yet the dictator held on to the reins. He interfered in daily briefings and always insisted on having his say, even down to the transfer of individual companies. He lacked any understanding of the generals’ preferred strategy of a mobile defence against a vastly superior foe, though it was this very strategy that had enabled the Germans to inflict spectacular retaliatory blows on the Soviet army. Hitler saw to it that a bloody war of attrition took place in the East, with the Red Army paying dearly with hecatombs of casualties as Stalin ruthlessly pushed his armies forward in a westward surge. Despite its superiority in numbers, the Red Army took a multiple of losses compared to German casualties.

But the Wehrmacht, too, having had to shift its focus in the autumn of 1943 to defend against a possible invasion from the west, was gradually drained of its fighting strength by an unrelenting series of heavy battles and withdrawals. Compared to 22 June 1941, it had since become a mere shadow of itself, propped

up by the deployment of more than a million foreign soldiers and volunteers and by a brutal scorched-earth policy. To delay the Red Army's advance and compensate for its own losses, the abandonment of terrain in the East was coupled with ruthless plundering, the thorough destruction of infrastructure, and the deportation of millions of people westwards as forced labourers for the construction of defence fortifications or in the Reich's military economy. The treks included hundreds of thousands of Soviet citizens – Russian Germans, Caucasians, Ukrainians and other nationalities – all fleeing from Stalinism. Countless other political or racial 'undesirables', prisoners of war, partisans and concentration camp slaves were murdered by the SS and police at the last minute.

The drama in the East progressed to its bloody finale. The Eastern Front had all but collapsed following the spectacular breakdown of Army Group Centre in July 1944, and by autumn of that year the Red Army had practically reached the point from which the Wehrmacht had launched its Operation Barbarossa three years earlier, confident of victory. The Germans had taken about five months to cover a stretch from Brest-Litovsk to the outskirts of Moscow. The Red Army, by contrast, needed more than three years for its counter-offensive, despite its constant superiority in manpower and supplies, even as it moved further from its industrial base, and despite its having the most powerful allies on earth. This might explain why the military competence of the Wehrmacht, though serving a criminal regime, still managed to command the respect of its foes right up to the end of the war, even after suffering catastrophic defeats. But this admiration came also as a result of the deployment of over 2 million foreign soldiers on the German side, a fact that Hitler denied to the very end and that is also generally overlooked by historians. The Führer, to whom many had sworn their allegiance, thanked them with contempt. In his New Year's announcement of 1 January 1945, he publicly declared himself the 'victim of betrayal by our allies', who had supposedly forced him to withdraw from entire fronts. Behind closed doors he later called his allies weaklings, whom he had made the mistake of treating as 'equals'. The 'Romance peoples' had failed him the worst: France was a 'down-at-the-heels courtesan', and Italy had always been in his way.⁶ Except for the desolate group of foreign SS volunteers still defending the Führer Bunker in the centre of Berlin during the final hours of the war, his former allies and their recruits had fought in the East for their own national interests, he fumed, abandoning the struggle at an opportune moment or switching sides altogether.

Part I

THE ALLIES