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## **Invasion of Soviet Union A Level Extension Task**

### **Introduction**

The vast majority of observers agree that the war unleashed by the Nazi invasion of the USSR in the summer of 1941 was the most brutal and barbaric ever seen. What were the key reasons for this? Why did Hitler and his Generals see this war in the East as a different kind of war?

Read the extracts below and gather evidence to decide which of the following reasons was the essential cause of the 'war of annihilation'?

1. Antisemitism
2. Anti-Communism
3. Problems brought about by the tactics employed by the Wehrmacht

**SIR IAN KERSHAW:** Oh, a completely different sort of war to the war in the West. The war in the West was, from Hitler's point of view and the perspective of the German military leadership and so on, much more of a conventional war. Not in a military sense – they had new tactics and so on – but what I mean is that the treatment of the enemy was relatively lenient in the case of France, for instance, in the case of the Scandinavian countries and the rest of it, and what they wanted, as I've already said, in Britain was some sort of deal done rather than to demolish Britain and wipe it out.

In the case of the war in the East it was a very different situation. That there the Bolshevism was seen as the ideological arch-enemy and the people who were envisaged as being behind Bolshevism were the Jews who were, of course, the racist enemy number one for Germany for this Nazi regime. And so there, right from the very beginning, racial annihilation – genocide – was built into the equation. And Hitler said when he spoke to his Generals on the 30th of March 1941, preparing for this war in the East, that this will be a different sort of war, this will be what he called a war of annihilation. So that type of absolutely extreme brutality and ruthlessness, of taking no quarter, was there right in the planning of Operation Barbarossa. Right even to the way in which, for example, the Soviet prisoners of war would be treated, and the Soviet Commissars, their political Commissars who were attached to military units, that they will be captured and simply shot without military tribunal at all. And this was a different way of no quarter taken or given, but the ruthless demolition of the system and its representatives at every level without any hesitation. And that the military, in the case of the prisoners of war, that this was going to be a war where you couldn't feed these people and therefore they would be captured and large numbers of them, vast numbers of them would simply starve to death, because the food was needed for Germany. And in reality round about

three million captured Soviet soldiers never saw their homeland again because they died in captivity, many of them starving to death.

LAURENCE REES: So what are the Germans actually thinking that they're going to do to this place, even before they get in there?

ADAM TOOZE: Can we make another point about ideology before that, in the sense that one of the points that I would really want to stress is that there is a tendency to separate this off. And it's for very good and obvious reasons to separate the war after 1941 from the war before 1941, in terms of the war after 1941 being an ideological war and the war before that being in some senses a conventional European war. This seems to me fundamentally misguided, because of the significance that I attribute, and I think we ought to attribute, to ideology in the decision making in 1939. If you believe that you have to go to war with Britain and France and fight that war to the finish against what you believe at the time to be appalling odds, because Roosevelt is essentially a slave of American Jewry, then the war from the very beginning is an ideological war.

You may not terrorise the French population the way you do the Poles, you may not commit genocide in France in 1940 in the way that you've already begun to do in Poland in 1940, but the wider strategic logic of the war is, as far as I could see for Hitler, a single piece. It isn't as though he fights one war rather reluctantly because it's a practical war that Chamberlain or somebody has forced on him and then finally gets to face eastwards and fight the ideological war he's always wanted to fight. It's precisely because he understands world Jewry to have reorganised its campaign against Germany and to have refocused it via America in the West that the war in the West is already an ideological struggle.

What happens when you begin to think about the war in the East is that you can begin to realise visions of Lebensraum and if you are a conspiratorial anti-Semite you also, of course, encounter the brute geographical fact that the vast bulk of European Jewry lives in what used to be the Tsarist pale, in the space between Poland and western Russia. And so when the Germans begin to prepare the invasion they get the green light in early weeks of December 1940.

Three plans for mass murder bubble up very quickly. One is the Judeo side: Heydrich receives orders to begin to package together a European solution from Goering, we think, in the first weeks of January 1941. Another one is the Generalplan Ost: the planning not just for the elimination of the Jewish population in the areas which were occupied, but the strategic long term removal by death, starvation or displacement of the Slavic population. These are plans which had already begun to be formulated in Poland and at that point have already been closely linked with the killing or displacement of Jews in 1939 and early 1940. And these plans now begin to take on, in some senses, a more realistic aspect, because there's simply more space to work with.

The problem of planning in Poland was it was overpopulated and too small. As soon as you are able to think of the entire space to the Urals, for instance, as your playground and drawing board, then settlement planning becomes much more 'viable'. And the third element, separate from those two, both of which are being pushed by the SS and Himmler and Heydrich, is the now notorious Hunger Plan which is formulated not in the first instance by the SS but in conjunction with the military, the logistical planners and the economic planners of the military, and Herbert Backe who's the Secretary of State in the Agricultural and Food Ministry, who is himself a prominent SS man and personal friend of Reinhard Heydrich. But that

planning goes forward down a different track. But each one of these plans involves the deliberate conceptualisation of the killing, murdering and starving of millions, and in the case of both the General plan Ost and the Hunger Plan, tens of millions of people.

LAURENCE REES: To what extent can we see the invasion of the Soviet Union as marking an important escalation in the barbaric policies of the Third Reich?

NORBERT FREI: Well, we must not forget how barbaric the battle against Poland was, and that there were Einsatzgruppen behind the Front shooting and killing in Poland. But you are quite right it gets onto another dimension when it comes to the war against the Soviet Union, and it's the annihilation of people as an integral part of this war right from the beginning. Now for the first time there are millions of Jews who are in the reach of the Germans because of the start of this war. There were already masses of Jews in Poland, but some of them or millions of them could flee to the Soviet Union and now there's the Judenfrage on a much larger scale than it ever was before for the Germans.

LAURENCE REES: Reading your book I was reminded of the danger of taking the persecution and extermination of the Jews out of the general context of the war, because we have to see the Nazis' attitude to the Jews as they go into the Soviet Union as part of a broader policy.

NORBERT FREI: Yes, it's part of a broader policy but it's also the single most ideological aspect of this policy. There was certainly a broad attempt to get rid of all these 'worthless' people, races that are not at the top of the hierarchy, and to gain slave workers and all of these ideas, but there's a particular point in going after the Jews. This is also the reason why despite all these millions of other Soviet people who were killed by the Germans during this war, despite the starvation of these millions of Russian and Soviet prisoners of war, the fight against the Jews was still something different.

LAURENCE REES: To what extent do you think the German troops who entered the Soviet Union in June 1941 were predisposed to behave in a different way than German forces had in the West?

OMER BARTOV: They were predisposed quite differently. The most important reason for this being that their view of the war they were going to fight in the East was moulded both by their education in the years preceding the war, and by specific orders regarding how that war in the Soviet Union would be conducted. There were also some of them who were influenced by previous experiences in the war, not so much in the West but the war in Poland in 1939, which set a precedent and was an introduction to the kind of war that would be fought in the Soviet Union.

LAURENCE REES: And what were their beliefs about the people they were going to fight?

OMER BARTOV: The general notion about the war in the East was that one was going to fight a war against a Bolshevik regime that was ruled by Judeo-Bolshevism - as it was called - so it was ruled by Jews, and that the people ruled by this regime were Slavs who were generally considered to be Untermenschen or sub-humans. So the general view of that war was that it would be, as Hitler called it, a war of keine Kameraden, a war in which there would be no comrades in arms. It would not be fought according to the rules of war as the Germany Army itself had followed to a large extent during the fighting in the West, but rather a war of

extermination, a war in which one side would have to entirely eradicate the other in order to win.

LAURENCE REES: To what extent was this German mentality in the East planned, or the product of individual decision-making by each soldier?

OMER BARTOV: You can always think about the individual's experience as being somewhat different from the general picture, and each person had their own experience and also his or her own memory of the event which is not necessarily the same as their experience; it's filtered through other media. But the fact of the matter is that the German Army marched into the Soviet Union with very specific orders as to how to behave, and those orders, despite what German Generals said in their memoirs after the war – that these orders were never passed down – well they were lying. These orders were handed down to the smallest units; soldiers were aware of them. So, for instance, the 'Commissar Order' basically gave directions that every Soviet Commissar who fell into German hands should be taken aside and shot without trial, without hearing, without anything, just because they had a red star on their cap.

The same was seen to a greater extent with crimes regarding the prisoners of war, and the German Army's own way of planning war. The German war plan was for battles of encirclement - expecting and anticipating large numbers of prisoners of war. Then the question would be what do you do with these prisoners of war? And what they did with them was practically nothing, they just surrounded them with barbed wire and let them die, or they marched them, having often taken off their boots or their coats, marched them hundreds of miles to the rear during which they were hardly fed, hardly clothed, hardly sheltered and they died in vast numbers. So there was clearly a view that in this war the kind of rules that applied to - and had been applied to - wars in the past or even during that war would not apply at that Front. There was yet another element to that, apart from a general view of the war against the Soviet Union as a war of extermination, which was that there were specific categories of people that had to be targeted, and it was known by the military that these had to be targeted and done away with.

One, of course, was the Communists, the Bolsheviks, the Komsomol - members of the youth movement - and so forth, but also Jews. And the German Army was aware of that and identified those targets for the forces that came behind it, and often participated actively in the killing of large numbers of people who were not in uniform. Thirdly, the German Army was instructed at the beginning of the campaign that this was a blitzkrieg, a lightning campaign, and that it would carry as few supplies as needed for the military campaign itself but that otherwise it would have to live off the land, which meant that they had to take their food from the population. And since they were moving into very poor areas, such as what is now called Belarus, White Russia, they basically caused widespread famine followed by widespread disease, which led to the death of millions of civilians.