



Operation Barbarossa: the History of a Cataclysm by Jonathan Dimpleby.

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On 22 June 1941, Adolf Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa, the largest military invasion in world history. Some three million German troops, accompanied by hundreds of thousands of Axis allies, streamed into the Soviet Union. Within months they were besieging Leningrad, approaching Moscow, and devastating Soviet armies in the south. In the same period, German and Axis forces subjected Eastern Europe to an occupation of unimaginable brutality. Few of the over three million Red Army prisoners they took survived German captivity. As they carved their way east, German troops persecuted and murdered Jews living in occupied territories. In his third book on the Second World War,¹ veteran British journalist and television presenter Jonathan Dimpleby tells the story of this vicious, world-changing period of the twentieth century.

Operation Barbarossa joins an increasing number of English-language studies of the Nazi-Soviet War written for a popular audience.² What sets it apart is Dimpleby's placement of the campaign and Hitler's ambitions in their wider historical, political, and diplomatic context. The book's narrative of Operation Barbarossa (22 June-5 Dec. 1941) begins at the post-World War I conferences that sought to remake Europe and prevent future conflict. This allows the author to situate the 1939 Nazi-Soviet pact in its context by exploring the history of relations between Germany and the USSR and their positions as postwar pariahs of Europe.

However, readers will not get to the campaign itself till they are a quarter of the way through the 500-page book; by that point, Dimpleby has provided pocket histories of Lloyd George's scuttled ambitions at the 1922 Genoa Conference, the Treaty of Rapallo, Stalin's murderous collectivisation policies and de-Kulakization, and Neville Chamberlain's misguided policy of appeasement. These topics are presented too briefly to explore new insights for those already familiar with the material, and too extensively to be navigable for readers without prior knowledge.

When the actual campaign begins, however, Dimpleby offers a lucid and harrowing account accessible to a popular audience. Based mostly on letters, diaries, and first person accounts, the narrative provides an in-depth account of Operation Barbarossa, concentrating on the fearsome fighting, the fate of Soviet POWs, and the horrors inflicted on civilians. No reader will come away with any illusions about the Wehrmacht's complicity in the Holocaust or the war crimes against the peoples of Eastern Europe.

Dimpleby establishes that the Eastern Front was the crucial battleground of the war and that its outcome was decided by Operation Barbarossa, particularly the successes and failures of Field Marshal Fedor von Bock's Army Group Center (not by the later battles at Stalingrad and Kursk).

1. After *Destiny in the Desert: The Road to El Alamein* (NY: Pegasus Books, 2013) and *The Battle of the Atlantic: How the Allies Won the War* (NY: Viking, 2015).

2. See, e.g., Antony Beevor, *Stalingrad* (NY: Penguin, 1999); Rodric Braithwaite, *Moscow 1941: A City and Its People at War* (NY: Knopf, 2006); Andrew Nagorski *The Greatest Battle: Stalin, Hitler, and the Desperate Struggle That Changed the Course of World War II* (NY: Simon and Schuster 2007).

Rather than repeating the claims of former German commanders that the Wehrmacht was defeated by mud and snow, Dimbleby endorses the latest scholarship in stressing flawed German planning, unrealistic decisions by Hitler and various leading generals, and, most importantly, the desperate but fierce defense mounted by the Soviet people.

In their conviction that the Third Reich was not only invincible but had an inalienable right to conquer any new horizons in the name of Nazism that the Führer might identify, the generals, both at OKH [German high command] and at the front, had convinced themselves that the Soviet military colossus was at their mercy.... As autumn turned to winter they preferred to tell themselves that the Rasputitsa [autumnal rain and resulting mud] was to blame for their faltering progress—as though it represented an unforgivable violation of the rules of warfare rather than an annual phenomenon which should have been factored into their calculations many weeks earlier. Nor did it cross their minds except fleetingly that General Mud presented the Soviet armies with the same set of challenges as they themselves faced. (359)

Dimbleby's generally excellent account is often flawed by long excurses, for instance, concerning Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt's August 1941 meeting in Placentia Bay, which resulted in the Atlantic Charter, or British deliberations vis-à-vis bolstering the Soviet war effort. Although the often fraught relationship between the Big Three had a vital impact on the outcome of the war, Dimbleby takes focus away from the epic battles between millions of troops in the east, and instead appears chiefly concerned with Western diplomats and politicians. In Dimbleby's telling, Churchill emerges as a more central character even than Hitler and Stalin in the account of the war between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.³

Overall, Jonathan Dimbleby has made a welcome contribution to the popular literature on the Nazi-Soviet War and Operation Barbarossa in particular. Readers new to the subject will find a detailed account of the causes and consequences of this critical campaign and the human tragedy behind the maniacal whims of the Nazi high command. "Operation Barbarossa was not only a fatal gamble but it was also how Hitler lost the war" (xliii).

3. Dimbleby correctly ensures that all references to Britain as "England" in his sources are followed by *sic*. Unfortunately, he nonetheless refers to the Soviet Union as "Russia" throughout—an egregious error, given the many non-Russian people who made up the population of the USSR and fought in their millions in the ranks of the Red Army.