

Geography in History

"THE TIDE TURNS!"

Hitler and "General Winter"

In Unit 6 you read how Napoleon conquered much of Europe during the early 1800s. In the 1930s another conqueror began to overrun Europe—Adolf Hitler, the Nazi leader of Germany. Like Napoleon, Hitler tried to invade the Soviet Union. The fierce Russian climate that you read about in the Unit 6 Geography in History lesson in your textbook proved an unbeatable enemy for Hitler as well.

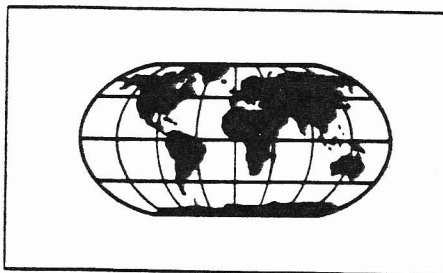
Adolf Hitler's goal was no less ambitious than Napoleon's. Hitler wanted to expand the power of Germany until he controlled all of Europe. His invasions of Austria, then Czechoslovakia, and, finally, Poland ignited World War II. After conquering almost all of Europe, Hitler turned and attacked the Soviet Union.

Before attacking the Soviet Union, Hitler first studied the features of the country that had made Napoleon's invasion difficult. Hitler's armies would have to cross the same vast plains and dense forests, huge swamps and mile-wide rivers both in hot summer and bitter cold winter. Time after time he told his generals he would not suffer the same defeat as "a certain other famous man," namely, Napoleon.

As Hitler saw it, Napoleon's biggest mistake came in thinking that he could win all of Russia by capturing Moscow. Instead, Hitler would concentrate on other goals that had to do with the geography of the Soviet Union. He would take the most populated and most prosperous land, the western and southwestern lands that produced nearly 40 percent of the country's food. He would also win control of the Soviet Union's iron and coal supplies. Key industrial areas would become his.

Furthermore, he would capture the oilfields at Baku in the south that supplied 90 percent of the Soviet Union's oil. Only when these objectives were met would he attack Moscow.

Inadequate supplies and climate were the other reasons for Napoleon's failure. Hitler planned to use the Soviet railroads to keep supplies moving. As for beating "General Winter," as one observer called the Russian cold, Hitler's plan was simple: to strike the Soviet Union so quickly that the war would be over before the cold set in. Modern tanks and trucks moved faster than Napoleon's horses and wagons, Hitler reasoned. He would also start his invasion a full month before Napoleon had—or so he hoped.

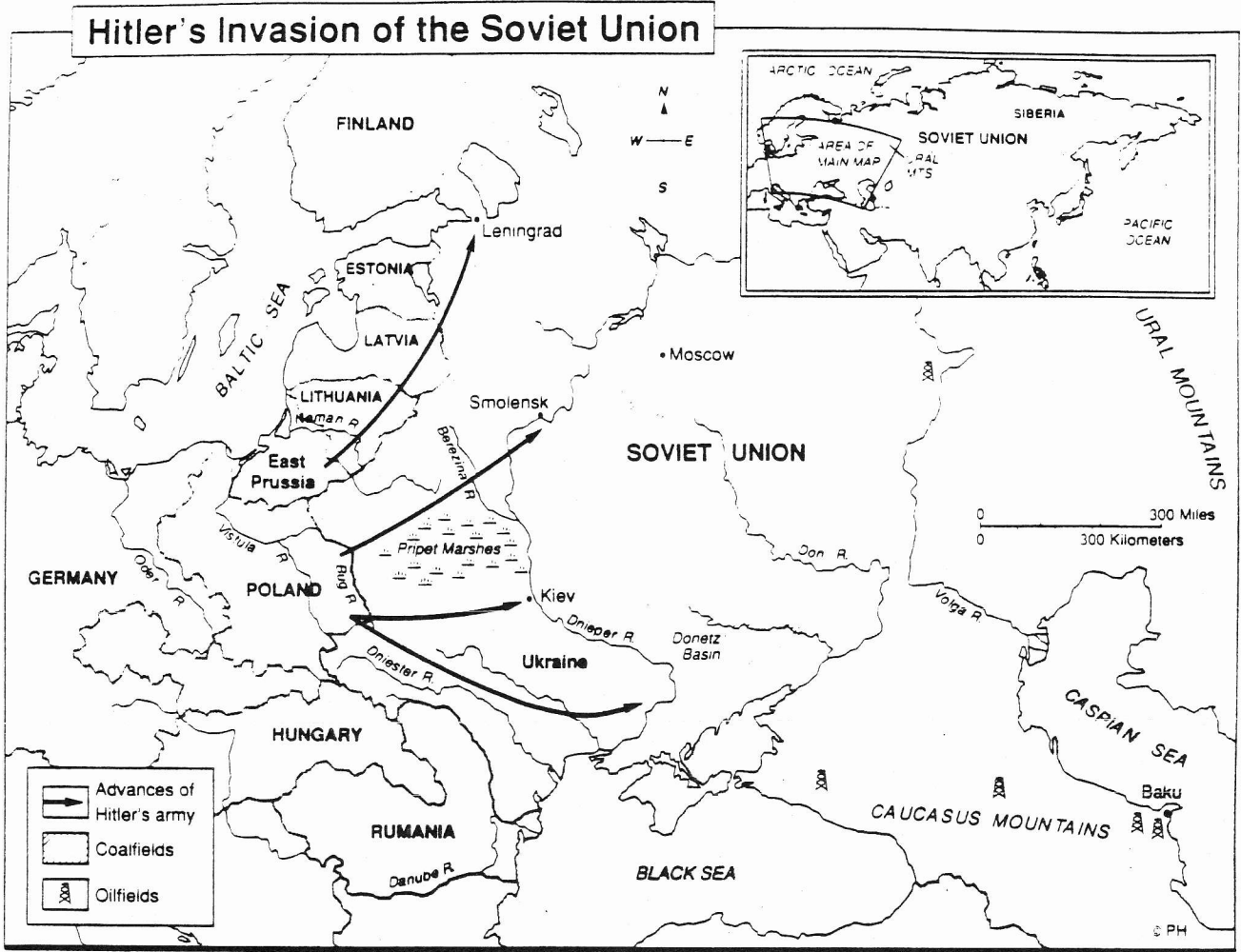


Fatal Delays

As it happened, however, a wet spring and battles elsewhere in Europe delayed Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union. On June 22, 1941, nearly the very day Napoleon had crossed the Niemen River into Russia almost 230 years before, Hitler's forces poured over the Soviet border. Like Napoleon's army, Hitler's was the largest invasion force ever assembled up to that time. Some 3 million soldiers were supported by 3,580 armored vehicles and 600,000 transport vehicles. These millions were spread

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out over a front stretching 1,800 miles from the Arctic Ocean to the Black Sea. A thousand bombers, protected by 800 fighter planes, pounded Soviet airfields, while 7,000 heavy guns knocked out border forts.

After the first three weeks of the invasion, the German army had achieved many of its objectives. One army group had slashed across Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, and surrounded Leningrad. Another had pushed to Smolensk, 440 miles deep in European Russia. A third group, however, had shown signs that it would need help capturing the coalfields and industries of the Donets Basin and Kiev, the capital of the rich grain lands of the Ukraine.

On August 22, as the German army pre-

pared for its push into Moscow, Hitler ordered his generals to turn back to the Ukraine. Only after Kiev was taken, on September 26, could Hitler be persuaded to strike at Moscow. By then, however, good weather was ending.

Finally, almost the entire German army was ordered to attack Moscow. In a matter of days, German columns had marched nearly 150 miles towards Moscow. Then, in early October, the autumn rains began. These rains were the heaviest in memory, many Russians claimed. The unpaved roads became tracks of mud in which trucks stuck fast. Soon 150,000 trucks were lost, many actually torn apart by efforts to free them. Snow began to alternate with rain. The German offensive came to a dead halt for

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two weeks. "Our wildest dreams have been washed out by rain and snow," a German officer wrote in his diary.

"General Winter" Calls a Retreat

Napoleon had been fooled by an unusually long, dry autumn. Hitler was caught off guard by an unusually early, bitter winter. The first frost came November 3. At first the chill seemed an advantage, allowing the attackers to roll forward again on now-frozen roads. But nine days later the temperature plunged to 5° F. By December 5 it had fallen to -35° F.

Although German tanks had pushed to the outskirts of Moscow, the assault had to be called off, for now "General Winter" had taken command. Airplane, tank, and truck engines froze solid. For hour after hour crews fed precious gasoline to fires under the motors, trying to thaw them out. Since antifreeze was in short supply, many engines cracked completely and became unusable. Tank turrets stuck, rifles and ammunition failed to fire, gunsights frosted over. Supply trains, trains built for Germany's warmer climate, froze even as they raced down the tracks. Soldiers fell too. In the first three months of winter, over 112,000 Germans were killed or injured by the cold.

Time and again during the year before, Hitler had questioned the army staff about winter clothing for the troops. Finally, to put his mind at rest, they had shown him a dozen sets of winter gear. Now Hitler discovered that those 12 winter suits were the only ones the army had. In the end, some divisions of the army received as few as 16 overcoats to share among 800 men. Without coats, warm boots, and gloves, no one could survive long in temperatures that dropped as low as -52° F.

The Soviets Strike Back

Conditions worsened for the Germans as the Soviets retreated. When winter clothing became available, it could not be delivered to the front because the railway supply system

on which Hitler depended was in chaos. It had been badly damaged by retreating Soviets. They had wrecked switches, train cars, water towers, and bridges, and had pulled up mile after mile of train tracks. Not only that, crops, whole villages, and forests were burned to prevent the Germans from using them. Horses were shot, trucks smashed, roads and abandoned cities booby-trapped.

Furthermore, the Soviet retreat was not the kind Napoleon had encountered in 1812. After an initial retreat, the Soviets began to fight back against Hitler's forces. Although the Soviets had seen many of their soldiers captured or killed, they were still a nation of 190 million. They had lost 18,000 tanks and 14,000 airplanes; but they moved factories from Moscow piece by piece and set them up east of the Urals. There they made more and better equipment.

As for the cold, the Soviets felt it too. But they had good winter clothing. Special oils kept their guns and tank engines operating. They fought close to their source of supplies. On the day the Germans gave up their offensive, the Russians counterattacked. Fresh troops from frigid Siberia led the way. For these men, subzero temperatures were a part of daily life.

For the first time in the war, Hitler's troops gave up ground. Hitler saw what was happening. "The Napoleonic retreat is threatening to come true," he warned. He ordered his men to stand fast. His generals protested, but he refused to listen. He had learned at least one lesson from Napoleon: retreat during the Russian winter meant disaster. The army stayed, but suffered terribly. A million Germans had been killed or wounded by the end of February, 1942. However, the greater part of the German army had survived the winter.

For two more years, the Germans and Soviets fought. Finally, in 1944, the Soviets pushed the Germans out of the Soviet Union. Although many soldiers had fought against his armies, Hitler, like Napoleon, blamed one in particular for stopping his triumph in the Soviet Union: "General Winter."

Name _____

Date _____ Class _____



UNIT 6

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in History**

A. Focus on Geography

1. Place

What geographical features of the Soviet Union made invasion difficult for both Napoleon and Hitler?

2. Location

a. Look at the map on page 26. What major rivers and marshes blocked the way from Poland to Moscow?

b. Were the Germans nearer to Moscow once they reached Leningrad or after they took Smolensk? Explain.

3. Interaction

How did the Russians change the environment to slow the Germans?

4. Movement

Why did Hitler believe he could complete his invasion faster than Napoleon?

5. Regions

What regions of the Soviet Union interested Hitler most and why?

B. Critical Thinking

Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. **Making Comparisons.** How did Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union differ from Napoleon's?
2. **Checking Consistency.** Was Hitler's decision to attack Moscow after capturing Kiev consistent with his determination not to repeat Napoleon's mistakes? Why or why not?
3. **Perceiving Cause and Effect Relationships.** Why do you think the Soviets moved their factories beyond the Ural mountains?