

Invasion of the USSR

Enquiry: When was the turning point of the Second World War?

Ms Dawson



In 1939 Nazi Germany and the USSR had shocked the world by signing a **non-aggression pact**. This was because their countries had completely different political beliefs. The USSR (led by Joseph Stalin) was **Communist**, and the Nazis hated Communism. Stalin's Communist USSR didn't agree with Nazi political beliefs either. Despite Hitler and Stalin's big differences, the two powers agreed never to attack one another and instead divide Poland between them in September of 1939. Despite this, there was still tension between Germany and the USSR. They had signed the pact because it was useful for them at the time, not because they were genuine allies. The Nazis believed that the people of Eastern Europe were inferior to Germans. It was also part of Hitler's promise to Germany that he would gain 'living space' for his people. Although he had signed a non-aggression pact with the USSR, Hitler had planned to invade it since 1940. With a successful invasion of the USSR, Hitler hoped to take control of their oil and land, and to destroy communism.



On 22 June 1941 the Nazi invasion of the USSR (Operation Barbarossa) began. The Nazis mobilised four million men for the operation. These men invaded the Western USSR along a 1,800 mile long front. The early stages of the invasion were hugely successful for the Nazis. Within weeks the Nazis had occupied some of the most valuable parts of the USSR. By October the Nazis were at the gates of Moscow and Leningrad. The **Siege** of Leningrad lasted for two and a half years and inflicted lots of damage on the USSR. Around 100,000 citizens of Leningrad starved to death every month. Food shortages caused people to begin catching and eating cats and dogs. Some people even resorted to **cannibalism**. The German armies captured 5,000,000 Red Army troops, who were treated horribly. Many Red Army prisoners of war never returned alive. The Nazis deliberately starved or killed many of them. This was because the Nazis hoped to replace the population with German settlers once they had conquered the land.



Despite the early victories of the German invasion, it was not completely successful. Throughout the invasion, as the Soviets had retreated east, they had employed **scorched earth** tactics. This meant the Soviet Army burnt all the farmland and crops to prevent them being used by the advancing Germans. Winter arrived in November 1941. The temperatures dropped to -40°C and the Nazi army found themselves in hostile territory with few supplies. This halted the Nazi advance and turned the **Eastern Front** into a **stalemate**. The opening of the Eastern Front was a hugely significant moment in the Second World War. The Nazis were now fighting a **war on two fronts**. The Eastern Front relieved the pressure on Britain as 75% of the German army were **deployed** to the USSR. The conflict also drained the energy, morale and industrial strength of the German army. In the initial invasion alone, the German army suffered over a million casualties.



A further significant outcome of Operation Barbarossa was that it caused the USSR to change their relationship with the Western allies. Churchill was quick to realise that an alliance with the Soviet Union could help Britain's war with Germany. Although Churchill had previously been heavily critical of Stalin, Britain and the USSR began to work together. Stalin began to be known as 'Uncle Joe' - a sign that the Anglo-Soviet relationship had changed. It was vital to the British that the Soviets were able to continue fighting the Germans. So Britain began to send them help. In September 1941, Churchill agreed to send 2250 tanks and 1800 fighter aircrafts to the USSR. They also sent them supplies to support the soldiers, including 3 million pairs of army boots. Despite their differences, the USSR was now allied with the West against Nazi Germany, and Hitler was fighting a war on two fronts with enemies on either side. This new alliance had the potential to change the direction of the war.



Glossary

Non-aggression pact: A pact where two countries promise not to invade one another.

Communist: The political system of the USSR, which believed in no private property.

Siege: A military operation that involves surrounding somewhere and trying to starve them into surrender.

Cannibalism: Eating humans.

Scorched earth: Deliberate and widespread destruction of property.

Eastern front: Where the war was being fought in the East.

Stalemate: A military situation where no one is winning.

War on two fronts: An undesirable situation where an army is fighting two enemies at the same time from different sides.

Deployed: When troops are sent to battle.



Comprehension questions:

1. What did Germany and the USSR sign in 1939?
2. Why was there tension between Germany and the USSR?
3. Why did Hitler want to invade the USSR?
4. When was Operation Barbarossa launched?
5. In what ways was the German invasion of the USSR initially successful?
6. In what ways did the German invasion of the USSR become difficult later?
7. How did the German invasion of the USSR change the relationship between the USSR and Britain?

Challenge: Why was the opening of the Eastern front a significant moment?

Sentence starter: The opening of the Eastern front was a significant moment because...

This may have meant that...



Turning point table

Date	In your opinion, who looks likely to win the war at this point?	Evidence to justify your view
June 1940	Nazi Germany	They had defeated Poland, Denmark, Norway, Belgium, the Netherlands, and France. They had forced the British and French to evacuate.
May 1941		
November 1941		



Extension Question

How did Operation Barbarossa make Nazi Germany vulnerable?
Use the sentence starters and key words below to help you.

Sentence starters:	Key words
<i>Operation Barbarossa made Nazi Germany vulnerable because...</i> <i>Evidence to support this is...</i> <i>This would have meant that...</i> <i>This was significant because...</i>	Invasion War on two fronts Alliance Casualties

