



The Holocaust Educational Trust

Operation Barbarossa A-Level Extension Tasks

Introduction

The following activity is intended for use with students aged 16 and over, and assumes the form of a source-work exercise. Students should read through the excerpts of expert interviews and respond to the questions with extended essay-style answers. Whilst referring directly to the relevant historian(s) in their response, students should also be encouraged to utilize all resources available to them via the WW2history.com website.

LAURENCE REES: And the single most mistaken decision?

DAVID CESARANI: I think it has to be Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union. It wasn't decisive in and of itself but it was such a gamble that a few bad throws of the dice and it would be irredeemable. Now, it could have gone the other way, but it was on such a knife edge that there wasn't room for too many setbacks. There were no reserves. And this is where Adam Tooze has a point. The whole operation of Barbarossa was an all or nothing thing. Everything was thrown in, there was no elasticity. And certainly once a two front war had developed the Nazis were lost because any setback cannot be redeemed by the readjustment of their positions or the reallocation of forces. They just didn't have enough resources.

LAURENCE REES: What do you see as the major turning point in World War Two?

OMER BARTOV: The invasion of the Soviet Union. You could say it was inevitable because what would Hitler be without fighting a war against Bolshevism? How could Hitler remain an ally of the Soviet Union? And at the same time it was - and he sort of expresses relief when he can finally go to war against the Soviet Union - but that was really the beginning of the end. Once Hitler invades Russia, the war changes completely. Now, you could argue that it really becomes a world war then and that even Hitler starts thinking about it as such only in December 1941 with the Soviet counteroffensive, which means that Germany will not win the war against Soviet Union any time soon, and, of course, Pearl Harbour. And then it becomes a world war. But I think that it is the moment when Hitler launches his three million troops

against the Soviet Union that things change and there's no going back. And Hitler knows it, he speaks in those terms. It is also the beginning of mass genocide, of mass killing on a totally unprecedented scale, nothing like that had happened even in Poland. So I think that's the turning point.

TASK: How far can ideology alone account for the decision to invade the Soviet Union? Was the invasion latently genocidal?

IAN KERSHAW: 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: 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.

TASK: To what extent did the invasion of Soviet Russia make the Holocaust as we know it inevitable?