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HITLER'S STRATEGIC DILEMMA

On 19 July 1940 Hitler convened the Reichstag in the Kroll Opera House in Berlin to witness his mass creation of the new German marshalate. It was a consciously Napoleonic gesture and, like Napoleon's elevation of eighteen of his generals to be Marshals of the Empire on 9 May 1804, was designed to glorify the head of state rather than honour his military servants. His three army group commanders, Bock, Leeb and Rundstedt, his personal chief of staff, Keitel, the army commander-in-chief, Brauchitsch, four of the most successful field commanders, Kluge, Witzleben, Reichenau and List, and three Luftwaffe chiefs, Milch, Sperrle and Kesselring, were on the roll; Goering was appointed to the novel rank of Reichsmarschall, a distinction he decided entitled him to yet another splendid uniform, and was decorated with the Great Cross of the Iron Cross, the fifth – and last – award of an honour previously conferred by the Prussian kings on Blücher, Moltke and Hindenburg.

Although the creation of the marshalate was the sensational event of that day, the actual point of the occasion was to review for the puppet deputies the course of the Second World War thus far and to state the terms on which it might be concluded. Hitler's speech was intended as an appeal, via world opinion, to Britain, exposing the hopelessness of her position and inviting her government to make peace. William Shirer, the American journalist, who witnessed it and was a connoisseur of Hitler's speeches, thought it his

Previous page: *The German retreat from Moscow, December 1941. Left: Hitler during his one-day 'victory' visit to Paris, 23 June 1940. Albert Speer is on his right and Martin Bormann is in profile on his left.*

finest performance: 'The Hitler we saw in the Reichstag tonight was the Conqueror, and conscious of it, and yet so wonderful an actor, so magnificent a handler of the German mind, that he mixed superbly the full confidence of the conqueror with the humbleness which always goes down so well with the masses when they know a man is on top.' His appeal came at the very end of his long oration: 'In this hour, I feel it to be my duty before my own conscience to appeal once more to reason and common sense in Great Britain as much as elsewhere. I consider myself in a position to make this appeal since I am not the vanquished begging favours, but the victor speaking in the name of reason. I see no reason why this war must go on.'

He did not, however, disclose, or even apparently harbour, any view of how it might be ended. Since the arrangement of the armistice with France, intellectually and emotionally Hitler had given himself a vacation from responsibility from which he was loath to return. In the company of two old comrades of the trenches he had toured the First World War battlefields of the Western Front where he had fought with great bravery as a common soldier. He had visited the sights of Paris, to muse at Napoleon's tomb and view the Opéra, the supreme expression of his taste in architecture. He had wandered through his favourite South German landscapes, breathing the mountain air and the adulation of simple people. He had waited for a week in one of his many purpose-built headquarters, at Freudenstadt in the Black Forest, for word that Churchill was recognising the reality of defeat. It was with reluctance that he had returned to the burdens of leadership, made all the heavier by the need to decide the future. Britain or Russia? That was the choice of enemy he confronted at the crossroads to which his decision for war ten months earlier had now brought him.

Either choice was disagreeable and dangerous. He could not be defeated by Britain but he could be humiliated in the attempt to invade her; moreover, he clung to his dream of winning Britain's co-operation rather than beating her into subjection. On the other hand, he had long and ardently desired the defeat and subjection of Russia; but he recognised the dangers of the attempt. Russia was strong, her centres of power remote; only the fear that time would make her stronger and the urge to incorporate her fertile and productive western territories – those Germany had briefly possessed in 1918 – drove him to seek for ways through the risk of an eastern offensive.

During the days after his Reichstag speech, Hitler addressed himself to debating these dilemmas with his commanders. Erich Raeder, his Grand Admiral, warned that, 'if the preparations for Sealion' (by which he meant the defeat of the RAF) 'cannot definitely be completed by the beginning of September, it will be necessary to consider other plans.' In fact Hitler, even during his 'vacation' after the French armistice, had told Schmundt, his chief Wehrmacht adjutant, that he was considering an attack on Russia – which was not what Raeder meant by 'other plans' – and had set Colonel Bernhard von Lossberg, one of OKW's operations officers, to draft a study (which Lossberg codenamed 'Fritz', after his son). He now set OKH to the same task.

At the end of July he reconvened discussions with his commanders at the Berghof, his Bavarian retreat. On 31 July he told Brauchitsch and Halder that he was reversing his decision, taken in mid-June, to demobilise thirty-five divisions to provide manpower for the economic war against Britain, would in fact increase the strength of the army to 180 divisions (he had already ordered a doubling of the number of Panzer divisions from ten to twenty) and would accelerate the transfer, already begun, of forces to the east, so that by the spring of 1941 he would have 120 divisions close to Russia's border.

This decision could be interpreted as a precautionary move. He had been alarmed by Russia's occupation of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia in mid-June and by its annexation of Bessarabia and North Bukovina from Romania on 28 June – an annexation in which he was bound to acquiesce, since Russia's claim to those provinces had been agreed in the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact of 22 August 1939. These acquisitions of territory could be seen as threatening. They consolidated a move westward of Russia's strategic boundary, which since September of the previous year had engulfed 286,000 square miles inhabited by 20 million people. Hitler did not, however, believe that Russia intended to attack. It was rather that the boundary changes enlarged Russia's opportunities for further strategic expansion while narrowing Germany's. The occupation of the Baltic states threatened Finland, effectively a German protectorate, and extended Russia's area of control in Baltic waters (where Germany, among other things, trained its U-boat crews). The annexation of Romania's Danubian provinces threatened Bulgaria, a German client state, and improved Russia's opportunity of seizing the Mediterranean entrance to the Black Sea.

It was the evidence these 'forward' moves gave of Russia's determination to pursue its own advantage in the teeth of Germany's proven military power that persuaded Hitler he could not defer a test of strength with her for ever – and, if so, it must be sooner rather than later. Foreign Armies East, the OKH intelligence branch which monitored Soviet capabilities and intentions, had reported in May, from the military attaché in Moscow, that the Red Army, though capable of raising 200 infantry divisions for war, remained so disorganised by the great military purge of 1938 that it would take twenty years 'until it reached its former heights'. Its information on Russian arms production, particularly of tanks, which would have warned otherwise, was defective: the size of the Russian tank fleet was reckoned at 10,000 (against Germany's 3500), when in fact it was 24,000. Hitler was prepared to pit his tank fleet against the Russian, even at odds of three to one; and he had no doubt that 120 German divisions could defeat 200 Russian, if Stalin succeeded in mobilising such a number.

When the twelve new marshals came to collect their batons at the Chancellery on 14 August, therefore, Hitler's talk was of the emerging need to fight the Soviet Union. Field Marshal von Leeb's record of Hitler's remarks reveals the trend of his calculations:

Probably two reasons why Britain won't make peace. Firstly, she hopes for US aid; but the US can't start major arms deliveries until 1941. Secondly she hopes to play off

Russia against Germany. But Germany is militarily far superior to Russia. . . . There are two danger areas which could set off a clash with Russia: number one, Russia pockets Finland; this would cost Germany her dominance of the Baltic and impede a German attack on Russia. Number two, further encroachments by Russia on Romania. We cannot permit this, because of Romania's gasoline supplies to Germany. Therefore Germany must be kept fully armed. By the spring there will be 180 divisions. . . . Germany is not striving to smash Britain because the beneficiaries will not be Germany but Japan in the east, Russia in India, Italy in the Mediterranean and America in world trade. That is why peace is possible with Britain.

— *A pattern of evasion and delay* —

On 27 August Hitler sent Schmundt and Dr Fritz Todt, his chief of war construction, to East Prussia to search for a suitable site for another new headquarters from which an eastern campaign might be conducted. On 6 September he approved the transfer of Bock's Army Group B from west to east, where thirty-five divisions, including six Panzer, were now deployed. And on 14 September, when his commanders again convened at the Chancellery for a war conference, he reviewed further reasons for postponing Operation Sealion against Britain; three days later he announced that it was postponed again.

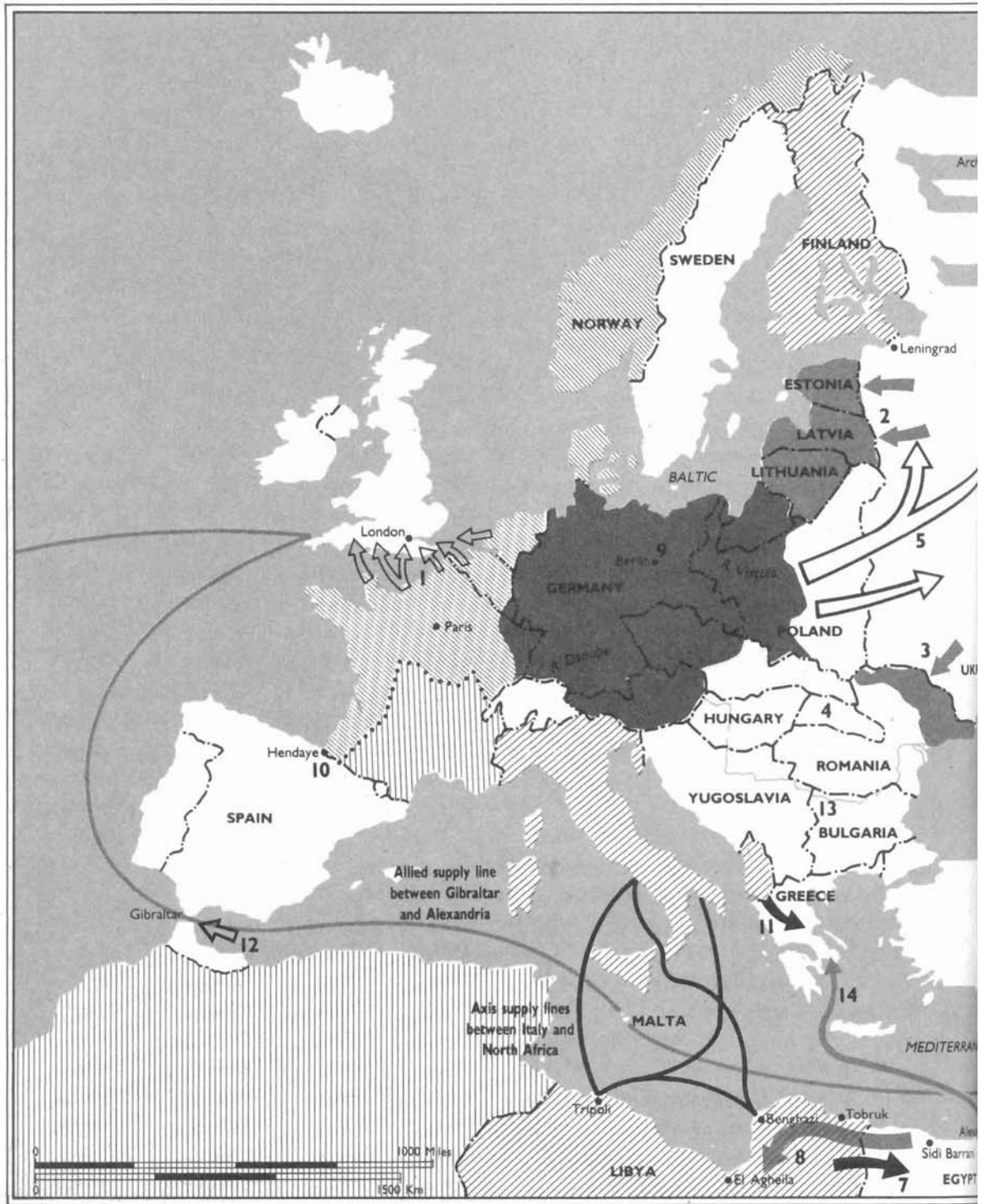
However, he could not yet commit himself to a firm decision for the attack on 'the Bolshevik enemy'. On 15 September Lossberg submitted his 'Fritz' plan to Jodl; ultimately 'Fritz' was to be the plan according to which the Wehrmacht would march eastward, but, as a communication between subordinate and superior within Hitler's personal staff, it remained meanwhile a contingency document. The transfer of German divisions into Poland continued, camouflaged as a move to validate Germany's guarantee of Romania's new frontiers announced at the time of the 'Vienna Award' of 30 August which transferred half of Transylvania from it to Hungary. Hitler also sent a 'military mission', in the unusually great strength of a whole army division, into Romania itself, together with a Luftwaffe air defence force of a thousand men. His diplomats were simultaneously beginning the discussions with Romania, Hungary and the puppet state of Slovakia which would lead to their joining the new Tripartite Pact, signed on 2 September between Germany, Italy and Japan, binding any two to come to the assistance of the third if it were attacked. All these were necessary and useful preliminaries to the mounting of an eastern offensive. Yet they did not amount to a direct provocation of the Soviet Union – though its leaders conceived dire suspicions of what the Tripartite Pact (in fact designed to support Japan in its burgeoning conflict with the United States) portended – nor did they commit Hitler to the decision for such an offensive itself.

As the need to accept or reject such a decision sharpened, Hitler fell into a characteristic behaviour pattern of evasion and delay. It had overcome him for weeks after

the Polish triumph, while he had fenced with his generals over the strategy for an attack on the Western Allies. It had seized him in an acute form twice during the Battle of France, once before and once during the attack on the Dunkirk perimeter. Now it was manifested in a search for means of winning the war by broadening its base. If he could not talk the British round, or defeat them by invasion – Sealion was cancelled for good on 12 October – he would achieve the same effect by multiplying the enemies they had to face and the fronts on which they had to fight. Mussolini had opened an offensive into British-garrisoned Egypt from Libya on 13 September. On 4 October, while the offensive still seemed to promise success, Hitler met Mussolini at the Brenner Pass, on their joint frontier, to discuss how the war in the Mediterranean, for two hundred years Britain's principal foothold outside its island base, might be turned to her decisive disadvantage. He suggested to his fellow dictator that Spain might be coaxed on to the Axis side – thus giving Germany free use of the British Rock of Gibraltar – by offering Franco part of French North Africa, and that France might be persuaded to accept that concession by compensation with parts of British West Africa. Mussolini proved enthusiastic – and understandably so, since the scheme included his acquisition of Tunis, Corsica and Nice (annexed by Napoleon III in 1860) from France. Hitler accordingly hurried home to Berlin to arrange visits to Franco and Pétain. Back in the capital, he constructed with Ribbentrop a letter to Stalin inviting Molotov, the Soviet Foreign Minister, to visit at an early date, when Germany and the Soviet Union might agree between themselves how to profit from Britain's current defencelessness.

A week later, on 20 October, he left in his command train, *Amerika*, to meet Pétain and Franco. The meeting with Franco took place on 23 October at Hendaye on the Franco-Spanish frontier. It has become famous in the diplomatic history of the Second World War for Hitler's furious parting shot that he would 'rather have three or four teeth extracted than go through that again'. Franco, supported by his Foreign Minister, Serrano Suñer ('Jesuit Swine', in Hitler's characterisation – he preserved a Benedictine catechumen's defensive antipathy for the Society of Jesus), stonewalled throughout the hours of negotiation. When his train left at two in the morning, Hitler had not advanced an inch towards co-belligerency with Franco. Pétain, whom he met on 24 October, proved equally unresponsive, but nevertheless succeeded in convincing Hitler that they had had a meeting of minds. The marshal's reputation, antiquity, soldierly bearing and evident patriotism were all to Hitler's taste. Though Pétain had conceded nothing more than a promise to consult his government, which obeyed him automatically, Hitler decided to believe that they were united in a productive hostility to Britain.

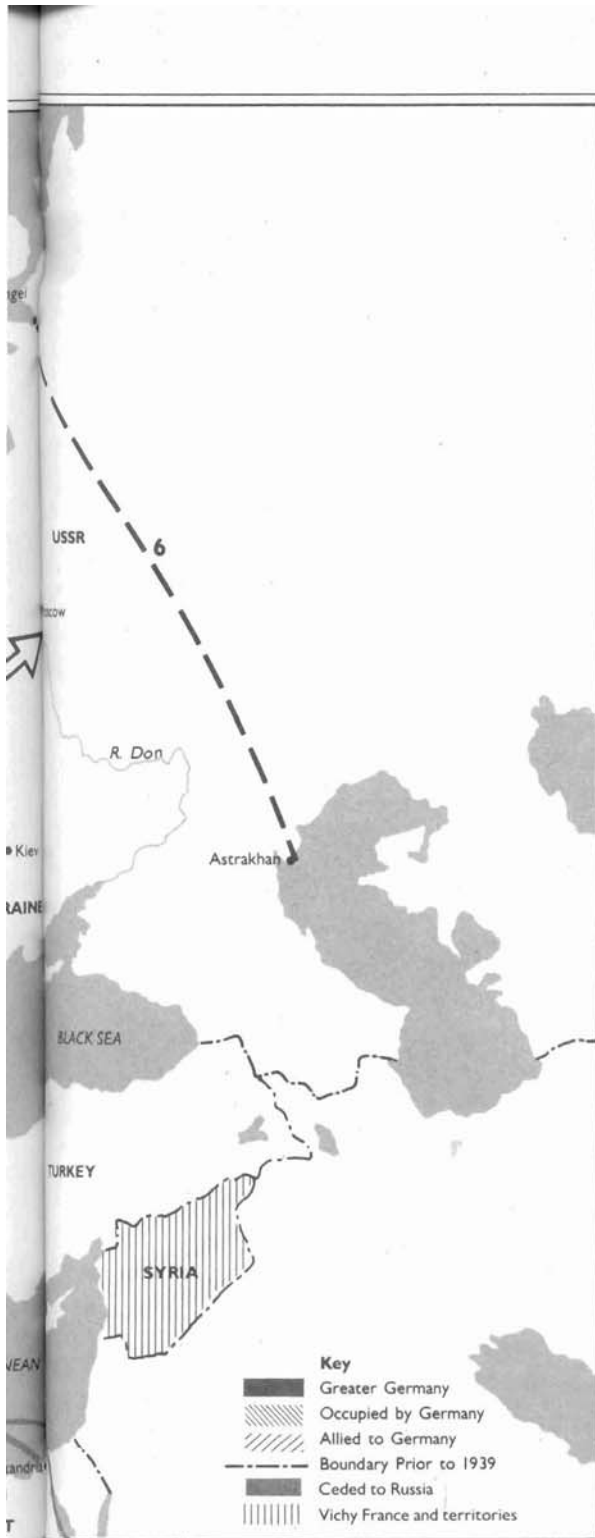
Hitler now had the outlines – despite Franco's heel-dragging – of a larger coalition war to present to Molotov at his forthcoming visit. While he waited for the Soviet Foreign Minister to arrive, he was distracted by the errant behaviour of Mussolini, who chose this moment to mount an attack from Albania (occupied by the Italian army in April 1939) into Greece. Mussolini claimed to be motivated by the fear that the British would establish



STRATEGIC OVER-VIEW, JUNE 1940–MARCH 1941

Key

- 1 The plan for Operation Sealion, which was postponed indefinitely on 17 September 1940
- 2 The Soviet occupation of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia in mid-June 1940, threatening Finland, effectively a German protectorate, and extending Russia's area of control in Baltic waters
- 3 The Soviet annexation of Bessarabia and Bukovina from Romania at the end of June 1940
- 4 Romania cedes territory to Hungary under the terms of the Vienna Award, 3 September 1940. General Ion Antonescu assumes power as dictator after the abdication of King Carol II, bringing Romania firmly into the Axis camp
- 5 The 'Fritz' plan for the invasion of the Soviet Union, presented 15 September 1940, committing the main weight of the German attack against Moscow
- 6 Hitler's 'AA' line, running south from Archangel to Astrakhan, the proposed boundary of his eastern conquests
- 7 Five Italian divisions march into Egypt, September 1940, occupying Sidi Barrani
- 8 The British counter-attack reaches El Agheila, February 1941
- 9 Germany, Italy and Japan sign the Tripartite Pact in Berlin, 27 September 1940
- 10 Hitler meets General Franco at Hendaye, 23 October 1940
- 11 Italy launches an attack on Greece from Albania, 28 October 1940
- 12 'Felix', Admiral Raeder's plan to hamstring Britain in the Mediterranean by capturing Gibraltar
- 13 Bulgaria and Yugoslavia are compelled to join the Tripartite Pact, March 1941. In Yugoslavia the government is overthrown on 27 March by a military coup in part inspired by the despatch of four British divisions to Greece from North Africa
- 14



positions in Greece if he did not, and he certainly had legitimate strategic reasons for wishing to deny them naval and air bases any closer to his own along the Adriatic than those they already possessed in Egypt and Malta. However, his purpose in striking into Greece on 28 October was an egocentric wish to emulate Hitler. Once fulsome in praise of his political 'genius', Hitler, whose rise to power had trailed in the wake of his own, and who had sought domestic plaudits for the remilitarisation of the German Rhineland while Mussolini was conquering an overseas empire in Ethiopia, had cast him into the shadows by the triumphs of *Blitzkrieg* in Poland and France. Mussolini's own abortive participation in the Battle of France (and the Battle of Britain, in which the *Regia Aeronautica* had briefly and ingeniously joined) had aroused the derision of neutrals and enemies alike. He was accordingly determined to win in Greece his share of the laurels which had fallen in disproportionate number to the Wehrmacht.

The failure of his invasion of Greece – the tale of its miscarriage belongs in the next chapter – confounded and outraged Hitler as he awaited Molotov's arrival. It not only upset his scheme to transform the Balkans into a satellite zone by peaceful diplomacy; it was also a provocation to the Soviet Union at a moment and in an area when and where he sought to lull its suspicions. Moreover, it had the immediately undesirable effect of furnishing the British with a pretext for returning to the continent. On 31 October Britain occupied Crete and the Aegean island of Lemnos with troops sent from Egypt, and in the next few days transferred air units to southern Greece, thus putting Romania's Ploesti oilfields, his main source of supply, in danger of bombing attack.

These developments provoked him to an outburst of contingency planning. He ordered OKH to prepare plans for capturing Gibraltar and occupying, if necessary, the French *zone libre*, and to prepare another plan for the invasion of Greece. These orders would result in the appearance of Führer Directives 18 (Felix), 19 (Attila) and 20 (Marita) on 12 November and 10 and 13 December. He also curtailed active consideration of Mussolini's request for German assistance in his offensive against the British in Egypt. 'Not one man and not one pfennig will I send to North Africa,' he told – ironically – General Erwin Rommel. The Panzer units Mussolini wanted would instead be earmarked for intervention in Greece from positions inside Bulgaria, Germany's First World War ally, which Hitler was now trying to coax into the Tripartite Pact, while Mussolini's army was left to manage its desert campaign against the British as best it could.

Even though distracted by unwelcome developments on the margin of his empire and thrashing apparently between strategic options, nevertheless throughout October and November Hitler remained fundamentally preoccupied by the decision for an eastern campaign. 'What will transpire in the east', he told Bock, his army group commander in Poland, in early November, 'is still an open question; circumstances may force us to step in to forestall any more dangerous developments.' However, he was sustaining his transfer of divisions from west to east, while both OKW and OKH proceeded with the drafting of plans. 'Political discussions have been initiated', he minuted to his commanders on the eve

of Molotov's visit, now arranged for 12 November, 'with the aim of establishing what Russia's position will be. . . . Irrespective of the outcome of these discussions, all the preparations orally ordered for the east are to continue.' By 11 November, therefore, it was clear that only if Molotov came bearing guarantees of Russia's acquiescence in Hitler's mastery of the continent could Hitler be deterred from mobilising for the eastern offensive.

Molotov came in no acquiescent mood. Despite the extent of Hitler's military victory and the power of his armed forces, the Soviet Union, he quickly made clear, was determined to hold Germany strictly to the terms of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (which defined their respective spheres of influence in eastern and southern Europe), to pursue its own interests as a great power and to demand knowledge of Germany's intentions in its relationship with third parties. Ribbentrop, at a preliminary meeting with Molotov, disclosed the German side of the bargain on offer: Russia was to share in the despoiling of the British Empire in return for siding with the Tripartite Pact powers. The Soviet Union would be free to expand southwards towards the Indian Ocean while Japan completed its conquests in Asia and Germany extended its area of control into Africa.

Molotov showed himself uninterested. At his subsequent meetings with Hitler, he insisted on the letter of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and on Russia's freedom to pursue its traditional interest in the Black Sea region. The Soviet Union wanted to annex Finland, which had been assigned to its sphere by the pact. It wanted to guarantee Bulgaria's frontiers (apparently whether or not Bulgaria asked for such a guarantee), thereby challenging Germany over control of that country. It also wanted a revision of the Montreux Treaty of 1936 to improve its rights of passage between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean via the Turkish Straits. Molotov demanded to know what spheres of interest the Tripartite Pact delimited between Germany, Italy and Japan, particularly Japan, its old enemy in Asia. In a final exchange with Ribbentrop, conducted in the German Foreign Minister's air-raid shelter during an RAF night attack, he revealed that Russia's interest in the Baltic did not stop with the annexation of Finland (Russian, of course, between 1809 and 1918) but included the question of Sweden's continuing neutrality and control of the Baltic exit to the North Sea, most sensitive of all Germany's home waters. As a parting shot, when Ribbentrop tried to remind him of how greatly Russia would profit by assisting in the dismemberment of the British Empire, whose defeat was at hand, Molotov asked, 'If that is so, then why are we in this shelter and whose are those bombs which are falling?'

Next morning Molotov left for Moscow. Although he had been in Berlin only forty-eight hours, his visit had lasted long enough to convince Hitler that 'the final struggle with Bolshevism', which had been a leitmotiv of his political creed since the earliest days of his 'struggle', could not now be deferred. In the last week of his life, he still recalled the outrage Molotov's intransigence aroused in him: 'He demanded that we give him military bases on Danish soil on the outlets to the North Sea. He had already staked a claim to

them. He demanded Constantinople, Romania, Bulgaria and Finland – and we were supposed to be the victors.’ Memory only marginally exaggerated the reality. When the draft of a proposed treaty written by Molotov reached Berlin on 25 November, it contained clauses requiring the withdrawal of German troops from Finland (an agreement allowing them to use Finnish territory had been signed on 12 September) and allowing the Soviet Union to acquire bases in Bulgaria. Hitler instructed Ribbentrop to make no reply.

— *A blueprint for ‘cauldron’ battles* —

The documents to which he devoted himself in the first weeks of December were military, not diplomatic. On 5 December the plans for a Russian campaign which OKW and OKH had been preparing separately since June and August respectively were brought together for joint staff discussion under his auspices at the Chancellery. OKW’s plan, prepared by Lossberg and still codenamed ‘Fritz’, agreed with that submitted by OKH (it had been completed by General Friedrich von Paulus, the future defender of Stalingrad) in accepting that the encirclement of the Red Army close to Russia’s borders was the precondition for success. The danger of engulfment by the vast spaces of the Russian interior had dominated German General Staff thinking since the previous century. That danger had prompted Schlieffen, the author of Germany’s war plan for 1914, to eschew the option of striking eastward against the tsar’s army – believed though it then was to be as inferior to the German army as Hitler held the Red Army to the Wehrmacht – in favour of attacking France. Schlieffen had recalled 1812, when Napoleon’s failure to defeat the Russians in their borderlands had first drawn him to Moscow and then condemned him to drag the Grand Army back again through the winter snows. Hitler too recalled the retreat from Moscow, which had destroyed the Grand Army, but he believed that the Red Army could itself be destroyed by deep armoured thrusts through and behind its frontier positions, creating ‘cauldrons’ in which its fighting units would be rendered down to inert pulp. OKH’s plan was a blueprint for such cauldron battles: the three army groups of the western triumph (to be entitled North, Centre and South) would direct themselves respectively on Leningrad, Moscow and Kiev; but, on their march to the Baltic, the capital and the Ukraine, their Panzer spearheads would encircle the Red Army in three great pockets, which the follow-up infantry would then reduce piecemeal.

Lossberg’s OKW plan was even more insistent on this point, and, though it was considered on 5 December apparently only in the form of verbal comments from Jodl, the OKW operations officer, it greatly influenced the trend of the discussions. Halder’s advocacy of the OKH plan laid great emphasis on the need to strike for and capture Moscow at an early stage. There was a degree of traditionalism in this accordance of priority, but Halder justified it, with considerable reason, by reference to the centralism of the Soviet system. Under Stalin, all authority was concentrated in Moscow; moreover, the Russian transport system, which in that largely roadless land meant the railways, was also

centred on the capital. So, too, by German intelligence estimates, was much of the country's industry. Halder's war diary reveals that the General Staff believed 44 per cent of Soviet war production facilities to be located in the Moscow–Leningrad region, 32 per cent in the Ukraine and only 24 per cent east of the Ural mountains. This industrial intelligence was faulty; but the rest of Halder's analysis was correct. It was disquieting, therefore, that even on 5 December 1940 Hitler showed himself already more drawn to Lossberg's 'Fritz' proposals which argued for postponing a final drive on Moscow until Army Group North had encircled the Russians in its sector against the Baltic coast and Army Group South had created a great 'cauldron' in the Ukraine. 'In terms of the weapons,' Hitler remarked, 'the Russian soldier is as inferior to us as the French. He has a few modern field batteries, everything else is old, reconditioned material . . . the bulk of the Russian tank forces is poorly armoured. The Russian human material is inferior. The armies are leaderless.' Hitler was well informed about the damage Stalin's monstrous purge of experienced generals had done to the Red Army's high command; the *Sicherheitsdienst* (the Nazi security service) had, indeed, supplied the NKVD (as the KGB was then known) with much of the evidence to incriminate them. By contrast, the *Abwehr* (the intelligence branch of the German armed forces) had failed altogether to identify the progress Soviet military industry had made in the development of new and advanced armoured vehicles, particularly the T-34 tank, which would shortly establish itself as the best tank in any army.

In the two weeks that followed the Chancellery meeting, OKH laboured to transform its draft plan into a Führer Directive. Jodl co-operated in the task, lending to it some of OKW's thinking derived from Lossberg's 'Fritz'. Nevertheless the emphasis on Moscow persisted until Hitler ordered a redrafting which directed Army Group Centre (which had Moscow as its objective) to lend armour to Army Group North for its encirclement of the Russian armies in the Baltic region. 'Only after this, the most urgent task, has been accomplished, followed by the capture of Leningrad . . . are the offensive operations to be continued with the object of seizing the vital transport and armaments centre, Moscow.' Führer Directive 21, when issued on 18 December, actually included an instruction for Army Group Centre to 'swing strong units of its mobile forces to the north, in order to destroy the enemy forces fighting in the Baltic area, acting in conjunction with Army Group North . . . in the general direction of Leningrad'. The directive also included a codename for the Russian operation. It was to be known, after the medieval emperor whom legend held lay sleeping in a Thuringian mountain ready to come to Germany's aid in her hour of need, as *Barbarossa*.

The starting date for *Barbarossa* lay in June 1941, many months in the future; all that Führer Directive 21 prescribed by way of timing was a stipulation that preparations preliminary to the attack deployment were to be 'concluded by 15 May 1941'. After December, however, Hitler amended the *Barbarossa* plan little, if at all. On 7–9 January 1941 he assembled his commanders at the *Berghof* to hear his justification, in detail, for a switch of strategic effort to the east. There he indicated that his objectives lay as far away as

Baku, on the Caspian, the centre of the Russian oil industry which German forces had penetrated in 1918. Early in March (before 3 March) he issued instructions to Jodl which assigned all but the immediate operational zone of the Wehrmacht to the responsibility of the SS and 'Reich Commissioners' appointed by himself; the implication, as he made clear in a speech to 250 senior Wehrmacht commanders at the Chancellery on 30 March, was that 'special measures' (execution, or deportation) were to be taken against Communist Party functionaries and 'hostile inhabitants'. Otherwise – although, in the words of Walter Warlimont, deputy chief of OKW's operations staff, 'during January and February the forthcoming Russian campaign gradually absorbed the efforts of the entire Wehrmacht', in redeployment, creation of military infrastructure and detailed offensive planning by army group, army, corps, divisional, regimental and battalion staffs – the objects and objectives of Barbarossa were altered not at all. The decision to which Hitler had set his hand in December 1940, which had been in the forefront of his mind since his overthrow of France in June, and which had in truth dominated his 'world outlook' since the day he had set out to take power in Germany nearly twenty years earlier, was to remain the fixed point of all he thought and did throughout the first half of 1941, however much supervening events might work to alter it.

— The '1812 factor' —

Hitler's certainty of purpose was not matched among his entourage. Numbers of his senior commanders and staff officers were intimidated by the '1812 factor'. Halder and Brauchitsch, when first discussing the project on 30 July, concluded: 'The question whether, if a decision cannot be enforced against England and the danger exists that England allies herself with Russia, we should first wage against Russia in the ensuing two-front war, must be met with the answer that we should do better to keep friendship with Russia. A visit to Stalin would be advisable . . . we could hit the English decisively in the Mediterranean, drive them out of Asia.' However, though Halder continued to utter warnings of the dangers throughout the autumn, he did not carry opposition to the sticking-point; Brauchitsch, who had been terrorised by his one open difference of opinion with Hitler after the Polish campaign, altogether lacked the nerve to do so. Jodl, who early had his own doubts, suppressed them when he detected the inflexibility of Hitler's intention, and on 29 July browbeat Warlimont, his deputy, and the three section chiefs of OKW's operations staff into quelling their own. Manstein and Guderian, rising commanders who were to shine in Russia, were disquieted by the '1812 factor' of space swallowing numbers, and Bock, as a very senior officer, expressed something of this to Hitler when the Führer visited him in hospital on 3 December: Russia, he suggested, was 'an enormous country whose military strength was unknown' and 'such a war might be difficult even for the Wehrmacht', thus offending his leader without deflecting him. Ewald von Kleist, the senior Panzer general, claimed (but after the war): 'Most of us generals

realised beforehand that if the Russians chose to fall back there was very little chance of achieving a final victory without the help of [a political] upheaval.' Although that may have been their outlook, nevertheless they collectively kept it to themselves. The army may have been intimidated by the technical difficulties of an advance to the White Sea, the shores of the Caspian and the banks of the Volga – Hitler's 'AA' (Archangel–Astrakhan) line, 1600 miles east of Warsaw, nearly 2000 from Berlin, marked the area of conquest he believed would bring about Russia's collapse – but they did not differ fundamentally from him in perceiving the Russian war as inevitable, nor (unless in intensity of feeling) in welcoming a confrontation with the Bolshevik and Slav enemies of Germany.

Reasoned opposition came not from the ground commanders but from the representatives of their sister and (to some degree) competing services, the navy and air force. Goering, as head not only of the Luftwaffe but also, however improbably, of the economic planning authority, was concerned by the economic effort a war with Russia would entail. He continued to believe, moreover, in the benefits to be won by sustaining an air offensive against Britain. Goering had confronted Hitler with his arguments on 13 November, immediately after Molotov's visit to Berlin, forecasting that the course on which Russia seemed bent would draw it into war with Britain, an outcome from which Germany was bound to benefit. Meanwhile, he advocated, Germany should maintain its current strategy. When Hitler turned the economic argument against him, however, claiming that Russian conquests would supply the food and oil needed to beat Britain down, he withdrew his objections and thereafter largely co-operated in the Barbarossa preparations.

Raeder, Hitler's Grand Admiral, was a more persistent opponent. He saw Hitler the day after Goering, raised the danger of fighting a two-front war, rightly emphasising that Germany's leaders had always sought to avoid such a strategic predicament, and urged that no new enterprise should be undertaken until Britain was beaten. Raeder had influence with Hitler. It was he who had advocated the attack on Norway, the success of which had reinforced his prestige. It was also he who had persuaded Hitler to prepare invasion plans against Britain, and who had then deflected the Führer from undertaking Sealion by warning of the likelihood of its miscarriage. He had already produced alternatives to Barbarossa – notably Felix, the plan to hamstring Britain in the Mediterranean by capturing Gibraltar – and he was also proposing initiatives in the Balkans and towards Turkey, which would put pressure on Britain at the Mediterranean's eastern end. Goering shared his strategic outlook. They were both attracted by the opportunities presented by seizing French North Africa, so that Italy could be supported in Libya and Britain outflanked in Egypt. Raeder went further: he wanted to take the Atlantic islands – the Azores, Canaries and Cape Verde islands, Spanish and Portuguese possessions – which would give Germany control of the western mid-Atlantic, particularly since he was outraged at what he called 'the glaring proof of [America's] non-neutrality'. However, while Hitler was excited by the prospect of bringing the Atlantic islands under German control, he continued to set his

face inflexibly against the idea of adding the United States to the list of his enemies. Within a year, his curious concept of honour between allies would prompt him to follow Japan into war with America. In the autumn of 1940, however, even as he withdrew from the thought of risking thirty-six of the Wehrmacht's best divisions on the turbulent tides of the Channel, he clung as if by the force of dogma to the principle of placating Britain's natural co-belligerent in the face of almost any provocation she might offer. Russia he would brave in its lion's den; the United States he would not confront at all.

There was more than strategic calculation to this diversity of policy. He had no admiration for the American people, as he did for the British, nor did he fear their military power in the immediate term. He did not, indeed, view the United States as a military power at all. It was its commercial and productive capacity which figured in his 'correlation of forces', and he did not believe that that capacity could be brought to bear against Germany until the war had run its course much further. However, it was precisely because his attitude to America was devoid of ideological content that he chose to disregard all provocation she might offer him in the months while Barbarossa was in the making. The maintenance of diplomatic, if not friendly, relations with the United States was a necessary simplification of the strategic balance sheet that would allow the preordained struggle with the Soviet Union to be brought on and carried through with the least possible diversion of effort.

Hitler's attitude towards Russia, by contrast, was suffused by ideology, drawn from many sources – racial, economic, historical – and fermented by his own rancours and ambitions into a self-intoxicating potency. He was obsessed, perhaps most of all, by the 'story' of German history: how the Teutonic tribes, alone among the peoples on Rome's western borders, had resisted the power of the empire, beaten it down, raised warrior kingdoms of their own and then turned eastward to carry their standards into the Slav lands. The epics of the Teutons, as Varangian bodyguards of the Byzantine emperor, as Viking venturers on the northern seas and founders of princedoms along the Russian rivers, first outposts of 'civilisation' in the east, as Norman conquerors of England and Sicily, as knights of the Baltic shore, formed a theme to which he returned night after night in the monologues which passed for his 'table talk'. The survivals and implantations of German settlers east of consolidated *Deutschum's* central European front – in Poland, Hungary, Romania, Czechoslovakia, even in Russia proper, outside the Baltic states, where 1.8 million German colonists were living as late as 1914 – evoked in him feelings of the 'manifest destiny' of the German race akin to those of the British, as they contemplated the diaspora of the English-speaking peoples about the oceanic world, in Victoria's heyday. Yet while the British saw the bounds of their world destined to grow wider and wider still, as if by the operation of some beneficently divine hand, Hitler was conditioned, by his obsession with the tribulations of the Germans, to see them as a people under threat, from which they were to be preserved only by unrelenting struggle.

The threat was manifold and amorphous, but it lay in the east, its instruments were

the 'motley of Czechs, Poles, Hungarians, Serbs and Croats, etc.' (the 'etc.' included all the diverse Slav and non-Slav peoples of Russia), 'and always the bacillus which is the solvent of human society, the Jew', and its permanent trend was towards the fragmentation and subjection of the German nation. Bolshevism, which he was determined to see as directed by Jewry, in his lifetime invested that threat with unifying and aggressive force. 'Cosmopolitan' Judaism denied the principles of racial singularity and purity which stood at the pinnacle of his value system; Bolshevism, by its espousal of the cause of the 'masses', itself a term of contempt, and its substitution of faith in economic forces for trust in the warrior's strong arm, repudiated the creed of aristocratic populism on which Hitler had founded his appeal to his folk. 'Jewish Bolshevism' had therefore to be confronted head on, its dominions wrested from its leaders by brute force, and the 'life space' (*Lebensraum*) thus liberated settled with the 'higher peoples' – Germans of the Reich proper, Germans of the eastern settlements, associated 'Germanics' of northern Europe – who, if they did not win supremacy in war, were fated to subjection and enslavement by the myriad hordes of their inferiors.

'Irrevocable and terrible in its finality', as David Irving, Hitler's biographer, has characterised his Barbarossa decision, it was therefore 'one he never regretted, even in the jaws of ultimate defeat'. However, though the decision was certainly fixed by December 1940, six months were to elapse before the forces necessary to implement it were set in motion. In the meantime a sequence of events centred on the Balkans, where German and Soviet power politics were most directly engaged against each other, was to distract his attention from the inception of the coming campaign. For all its appalling risk, Barbarossa was characterised by a certain 'stark simplicity': which would prove the stronger on the field of battle, the Wehrmacht or the Red Army? In the Balkans, during the months while the German army's divisions completed their redeployment to the start-lines from which Barbarossa would be launched, Hitler found himself embroiled in the complexities of an ancient strategic quandary: which way to throw his power among small states, militarily insignificant in themselves, which might nevertheless, by invoking the help of stronger protectors, disrupt the smooth unrolling of his chosen strategy?