

Operation Barbarossa: The History of a Cataclysm

Jonathan Dimbleby, 2021

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'Operation Barbarossa' was the Nazi military codename for the invasion of the Soviet Union. It was the opening salvo in a planned world historical campaign that would create a new German Empire stretching from the Atlantic to the Ural mountains, subjugating the Slavic peoples to the status of slaves and eliminating the Jewish population. Three million Nazi soldiers, alongside hundreds of thousands of Axis allied troops from Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, Finland, and Italy began the invasion in the early hours of June 22, 1941. The exhaustive study of Barbarossa began at the moment the operation ended, resulting in 76 years' worth of writing and reflection from tens of thousands of historians and participants. In the past 25 years, there has been a boom in studies of the Second World War, spurred by the opening of archives in Russia and Germany with the collapse of the Soviet Union and German reunification.

Jonathan Dimbleby, British journalist, documentarian, and author of two other popular historical works on World War II, *The Battle of the Atlantic: How the Allies Won the War* and *Destiny in the Desert: The Road to El Alamein*, synthesises the political and military history of this invasion in his new work, *Operation Barbarossa: The History of a Cataclysm*. The text is a good primer on the origins of Operation Barbarossa and the war on the Eastern Front until December 1945, and its bibliography is an excellent summation of the current state of the scholarship, as well a reliable index for those seeking further study.

Dimbleby's main argument is that the first six months of the war on the Eastern Front begun by Operation Barbarossa were the most important of the twentieth century, for in that time it

was definitively decided whether or not Nazi Germany would defeat the Soviet Union. According to Dimbleby, Nazi Germany lacked both the natural resources and manpower to fight a long war against the Soviet Union. Consequently, Nazi Germany's failure to defeat the Soviet Union by December 1941 marked its participation in a war of attrition it could not win. Thus, the remainder of the war after the first six months of Operation Barbarossa was a process whose end was already assured: the eventual defeat of Nazi Germany. Dimbleby also covers the origins of the invasion — going back to the interwar period, moving beyond purely military affairs, and giving greater context for the political dynamics of the invasion, specifically the Soviet Union's relationships with Great Britain and the United States.

Dimbleby's history integrates a wide range of academic sources into a cohesive and compact narrative. The author has engaged in little original archival research for the book, excepting a handful of British diplomatic files. He draws primarily upon the pioneering archival work of Australian military historian, David Stahel, to make his main argument, which also combines works by leading historians of the Eastern Front such as David Glantz, John Erickson, Richard Evans, and Ian Kershaw. Dimbleby further draws upon a wide range of memoirs and diaries, especially that of the leading Nazi German generals of the invasion, among them Heinz Guderian, Fedor von Bock, and Franz Halder, as well as those of Soviet officials and British politicians.

The major shortcoming of Dimbleby's synthesis is that, inferring from the works which he cites, he knows neither German nor Russian, relying solely upon English language historical studies, and all of the memoirs and diaries which he cites are English translations. This is not, then, a work that breaks new ground, but rather one which brings together a range of works which primarily draw upon German and Russian archival sources, synthesizing them in a coherent narrative which addresses both the military and political aspects of Operation Barbarossa. The work is a fine summary for scholars and an engaging introduction to the subject for students and the general public alike. Dimbleby has provided a useful new standard for thinking about and studying Operation Barbarossa.