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**NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
Newport, R.I.**

**THE THREE CRITICAL STEPS OF OPERATIONAL ART EVERY COMMANDER
SHOULD KNOW – AN ANALYSIS OF THE GERMAN DEFEAT AT STALINGRAD**

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College of the Department of the Navy.

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The application of operational art in the regressive planning process is a vital aspect of any successful operation. Three crucial steps of its methodology should provide the foundation for a plan to achieve the desired end state through economy of effort and minimal loss of life. The first step is to clearly define the objective. Since the objective is the starting point for regressive planning, it will be the cornerstone of this foundation and must be unambiguous. No amount of planning will produce a survivable course of action if it is built on vagaries from the onset. The second step is to identify and appoint an operational commander and establish a command and control structure. It must be appropriate in depth and scope for the given size of the operation and account for transition to post-conflict operations. It should ensure unity of effort, provide for centralized direction and decentralized execution, provide an environment for applying common doctrine, and ensure interoperability.¹ If this is not solved early and accurately the consequences could undermine advantages in technology, initiative, industrial capacity, and even the most superhuman efforts on the battlefield. Deficient command and control relationships will also have devastating effects on the remaining operational functions of intelligence, command and control warfare, fires, logistics, and protections. Once these relationships are established, if they are established correctly, they should not require significant changes. The third step is to analyze and understand the operational factors of force, space, and time, for these will determine whether or not the objective is attainable within the limits of the available support and force structure. Only after these areas are addressed should the planning staff be allowed to continue with analysis of the enemy's center of gravity, one's own center of gravity, and course of action development. Agreeable ignorance is not a quality a commander should tolerate from his

¹ Milan Vego, *Operational Warfare*, (Newport: Naval War College Press, 2000), 187.

staff. If an aspect of the plan is identified as not feasible, it needs to be verified through analysis and communicated up the chain of command as soon as possible.

The German invasion of southern Russia in 1942 is an example of an operation that failed to follow the guidelines set forth in the preceding paragraph. For today's operational commander, the abject failure of the invasion provides relevant lessons on the consequences of a breakdown in these critical areas. Problems for the Germans started with objectives that were not clear and continued with a command and control structure that was highly centralized, disproportionate in span and depth of control, and not unified in command or effort. This adversely impacted the cognizance of Adolph Hitler's staff planners, and caused them to overlook or ignore many of the pertinent operational factors. The combination of these mistakes directly contributed to the complete annihilation of the German Sixth Army, the Italian Eighth Army, and four Romanian divisions at Stalingrad. Of the quarter of a million men in these forces, approximately fifty thousand wounded soldiers and several thousand healthy specialists were evacuated by air, one hundred twenty-three thousand were captured and sent to prison camps and the rest were killed by disease, the elements, starvation, and enemy fire. Only five thousand of the prisoners survived captivity to return home after the war. This paper will analyze the objectives and guidance Hitler gave his staffs, the command and control structure he ultimately forced upon his military professionals, and the key operational factors that impacted the operation. Additionally, the execution of the plan will be discussed to provide the reader with the results of the planning failures.

In his memoirs, Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, arguably Germany's most brilliant military commander of the Second World War attributed the loss of the German, Italian, and Romanian forces at Stalingrad to three mistakes at the operational level. The first was the fact that Hitler changed the phased scheme of operations and consequently anchored the principle striking force of Army Group B in the fighting in and around Stalingrad. This can be attributed to Hitler's failure to clearly define his own objectives. The second was the inadequate number of soldiers holding an overextended front, a direct result of poor analysis of the operational factors. The third mistake, and probably the root cause of the first two since it had a negative impact throughout the entire operation, was the "utterly grotesque" chain of command. Under this final category, von Manstein summed up the frustrations of Germany's military professionals by blaming Hitler's frequent interference in the conduct of operations for the defeat at Stalingrad and the loss of the Sixth Army.² Hitler's micromanagement of the battlefield is a well documented issue and one worthy of investigation for its relevance to the problems caused by a civil/military mismatch and the issues that arise when strategic leadership interferes with the operational level of warfare. Despite the negative impact on the outcome at Stalingrad, this topic is beyond the scope of this paper and will not be discussed.

In addition to Field Marshal von Manstein's conclusions which account for the breakdown of the German Army at the operational level, there are many other possible explanations that could be linked to the destruction of the combined armies at Stalingrad and the failure of the campaign in Southern Russia. This paper will not attempt to answer all of them. Although

² Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, *Lost Victories*, translated from *Verlorene Siege*, (Chicago: H. Regency Co., 1958), 292.

certainly notable, strategic events during the worldwide fighting in 1942, the Allies opening a second front with OPERATION TORCH for example, will not be examined. This will not be a study of technology or industrial capacity, alliances, or an analysis of the virtues and problems of a dictatorship.

On April 5, 1942, Hitler issued Führerweisung (Führer Directive) Number 41 which ordered the planning for the continuation of fighting on the southern sector of the eastern front under the code name BLUE.³ Speaking in strategic terms, he first outlined his overall objective of the Russian campaign. “Our aim is to wipe out the entire defense potential remaining to the Soviets and to cut them off, as far as possible, from their most important centers of war industry.”⁴ Right away issues arose concerning the operational objectives of the 1942 summer offensive. Contrary to the advice of his staff, Hitler still did not regard Moscow as a strategic target, the destruction of which could destabilize the entire Soviet nation and help him secure his strategic objective of defeating Russia. Instead, Hitler ordered his forces on the central and northern parts of the front to stand fast in lieu of an operation in southern Russia. His broad planning guidance was issued as follows: “all available forces will be concentrated on the main operations in the Southern sector, with the aim of destroying the enemy before the Don [River], in order to secure the Caucasian oilfields and the passes through the Caucasus Mountains themselves”.⁵ Hitler’s intent *seemed* clearly focused on the destruction of the enemy’s army and the capture of the oilfields, but in reality what he ordered was more of a general offensive. He wanted to occupy the Caucasus front by

³H.R. Trevor-Roper, *Blitzkrieg to Defeat – Hitler’s War Directives 1939-1945*, (London: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 116-121.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

decisively attacking and destroying Russian forces stationed in the Voronezh area to the south, west, or north of the Don River but the objectives were not clear.⁶ Was the objective to deny the Soviets of the oil by cutting the supply lines of the Volga and Don River basins or seize the oil fields for Germany's use? No mention is made regarding the desired end state or a transition to occupation duty after the conclusion of major combat operations.

Hitler envisioned a sequenced plan that used blitzkrieg tactics to attack and capture the city of Voronezh, then sweep south and east to meet up in the vicinity of Stalingrad with a second thrust originating from Kharkov. Using the Don River to protect the flank of the thrust coming south, he hoped to trap the majority of Russian forces in a giant pincer formed with forces moving up the Donets Basin from Rostov. After the Germans had swept the Don River and met up with forces outside Stalingrad, Germany's allies would occupy the extended front along the Don to protect the northern flank. With regard to Stalingrad, Hitler ordered that "every effort will be made to reach Stalingrad itself or at least to bring the city under fire from heavy artillery so that it may no longer be of any use as an industrial or communications center."⁷ No mention was made in Directive 41 of capturing the city. Hitler redefined his objectives midway through the first full month of the operation, but this made the situation worse for the operational commanders because no planning was done to account for the changes.

Further complicating the planning process for BLUE was the fact that Hitler's planning guidance was contradictory. He wanted a blitzkrieg assault but forbade the tanks from

⁶ Trevor-Roper, *Blitzkrieg to Defeat – Hitler's War Directives 1939-1945*, 116-121

⁷ Ibid

outrunning the infantry. He wanted encirclement and destruction of the Russian army but encirclement required speed and maneuver; destruction required mass and concentration. He wanted complete control, yet in order to be successful, maneuver forces required freedom of action on the part of the field commanders. Additionally, a limited amount of manpower and materiel was available for the operation, but Hitler was convinced that the German edge in technology, training, and tactics would combine with the “inferiority of the Slavs” to guarantee a victory.

If planning is allowed to continue based on objectives that are open to interpretation, the final plan will be extremely difficult to support with the operational functions of logistics, intelligence, fires, and above all else command and control. It is therefore absolutely critical to identify and correct this problem early in the planning cycle. This responsibility rests with the operational commander and his staff. If the command and control relationships are properly constructed to ensure unity of command and unity of effort, the right people will ask the right questions early and be able to define what is possible based on rational calculus and acceptable risk.

The Germans never identified an operational commander for BLUE. Unity of effort in the *planning process* instantly became a problem, and this had cascading effects on the battlefield. “Hitler wanted to smash the Russians by breaking the power of their army in the south, capturing the seat of the Russian economy, and then taking the option of wheeling up behind Moscow or down to the Baku oil fields. But his Generals had far less ambitious hopes and they disregarded the last part of the plan. The result was that OKW, the supreme

command of the armed forces, had one plan, and OKH, the command of the army, had another”.⁸

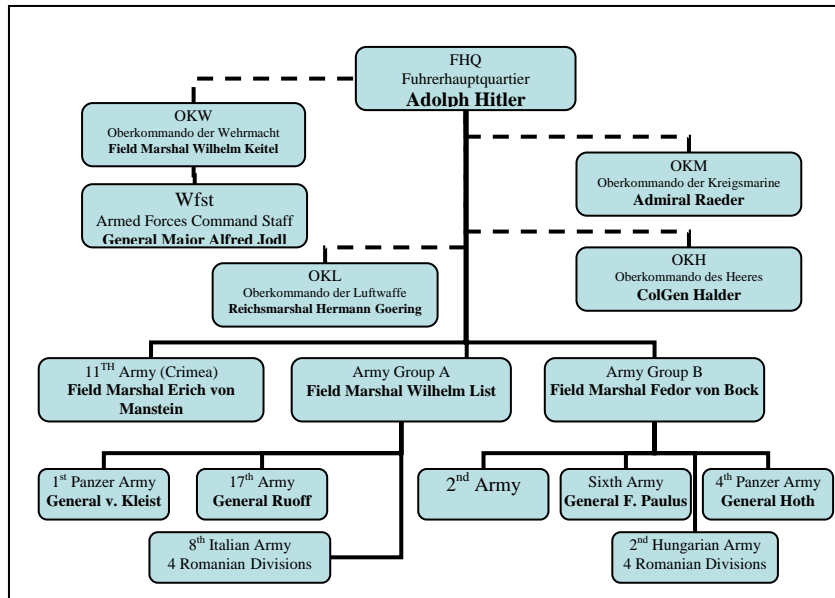


Figure 1 German command and control relationships for the start of OPERATION BLUE in June 1942. Dashed lines indicate that Hitler relegated his senior leadership to advisory roles.

Three army groups were assigned to OPERATION BLUE – Army Group A commanded by Field Marshal Wilhelm List, Army Group B commanded by Field Marshal Fedor von Bock, and 11th Army commanded by Field Marshal Erich von Manstein. Army groups A and B were augmented by Italian, Romanian, and Hungarian armies, all of which fell under the operational command of the Germans. It is important to note that Germany was fighting on multiple fronts in Russia and were engaged in large scale operations in North Africa, the Mediterranean, the Atlantic Ocean, and the occupation of Western Europe. Hitler, as supreme commander of the armed forces and head of state, did not subordinate any of his control. He did not trust Field Marshal Keitel or General Jodl and he eventually removed

⁸ Edwin Hoyt, *199 Days, the Battle for Stalingrad*, (New York, Tom Doherty Associates, Inc.), 86.

them from his decision making process.⁹ General Halder, the Chief of Staff of the Army, had no command authority and spent the first half of the campaign attempting to stymie the changes in Hitler's random thoughts on the objective. He was eventually fired and replaced by General Zeitzler, who alienated the OKW staff and conducted situation meetings with Hitler in private.¹⁰ These changes made Hitler both the strategic and operational commander for BLUE, and he had no qualms about bypassing the group commanders to issue orders directly to individual divisions within the army groups. His span of control was enormous. He alone maintained the big picture and as a result, his orders were often confusing and without foundation to his commanders in the field who were forced to be reactive instead of proactive.

To this point it is clear that Hitler failed to provide clear objectives and the military was shackled to a chain of command that had serious weaknesses. The last of the three critical steps is to analyze the operational factors of space, force, and time to identify some of the more challenging issues confronting the German planners. The sheer size of the eastern front for the Germans even before the start of OPERATION BLUE was daunting. Hitler did not have enough forces to continue operations in Leningrad or Moscow and invade the Caucasus at the same time, so he put the highest priority on the southern front. His planners, aware of the force limitations, carefully synchronized the operation in order to concentrate the maximum amount of force on the enemy. Hitler believed that the Russians would withdraw quickly into the interior so he emphasized speed but cautioned against overextending armored forces from infantry. Possession of the oil fields was a critical capability for the

⁹ Jukes, Geoffrey, *Hitler's Stalingrad Decisions*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press), 11.

¹⁰ Jukes, *Hitler's Stalingrad Decisions*, 10

Russian economy and military so the risks that accompanied the plan with respect to space had to be mitigated. This could have been accomplished by severing arterial lines of communication with substantial lodgment of German forces on the west bank of the Volga either above or below Stalingrad, and the capture of the important rail center of Rostov at the mouth of the Don.¹¹

With the addition of BLUE, the Russian front extended from Leningrad to Vladivostok. German victories in Western Europe were achieved in an area of 50,000 square miles, while the area in which it was to force a decision in the Western Reaches of Russia amounted to some 1,000,000 square miles. In 1941, the Wehrmacht threw seventy-five percent of its *total* forces into OPERATION BARBAROSSA¹² totaling 3,050,000 men, 3,350 tanks, and 7,200 artillery pieces.¹³ When this force is equated to the relative factors of time and space, the small increase in strength compared to the operations in Western Europe in 1939 and 1940 is completely negated. Reduced to representational mathematical terms the relation of density in men and tanks to the square mile in the West amounted to 55.2 and 3.05 respectively. In Russia, the density diminished to an infinitesimal 0.05 in men and 0.003 in tanks.¹⁴

Southern Russia, including the Ukraine, Crimea, and the Caucasus, was not as large an area when compared to the landmass attacked in BARBAROSSA, but it must be weighed against the fact that German forces were already committed along a massive front. The terrain was predominantly flat and open, except near the Caucasus, and favored armored and mechanized

¹¹ Jukes, *Hitler's Stalingrad Decisions*, 24.

¹² OPERATION BARBAROSSA was the code name for the invasion of Russia in 1941

¹³ V.E. Tarrant, *Stalingrad, Anatomy of an Agony*, (London, Leo Cooper, 1992), 14.

¹⁴ *Ibid*

tactics in dry weather. Few paved roads existed outside the Moscow metropolitan area. The rest were packed dirt and were nearly unusable for heavy wheeled vehicles in the spring and early summer. The great distances that trucks and tanks had to travel on these roads meant that numerous repair depots needed to be established and kept supplied with spare parts and POL products. This had the further implication that the rear area needed to be secured and the flank well protected to account for these depots isolated on the vast steppe. Railroads were not the same gauge as the German ones and most lines were only single track. Coal and special water filtration devices needed to be brought in from Germany to run the German locomotives and the great distances the trains ran made them susceptible to attack.¹⁵ Since rail was the primary means of re-supplying the army, tracks and bridges needed to be protected with considerable forces, further depleting the number of frontline troops available for combat operations. As the attack advanced, the corresponding lines of communication were stretched further and further. The weather was a constant concern and, when balanced against factor time, was an advantage for the enemy, who was not only acclimated but had considerably shorter supply lines. The most challenging aspect of the space was the huge space to force ratio confronting the German planners and the long lines of communication. To attack the vast expanse of the Ukraine and Crimea all the way to Stalingrad and Groznyy, Hitler and the General Staff committed just over 1,000,000 men and 1,500 tanks along a front that was 500 miles long.

Time was another factor that presented considerable difficulties. Following the start of the operation in late June, the advancing forces could only expect four months of favorable weather before the Russian winter set in. This meant the conquest of nearly 200,000 square

¹⁵ Heinz Schroter, *Stalingrad*, trans. Constantine Fitzgibbon (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co, Inc, 1958), 45.

miles of territory plus the establishment of an infrastructure to support the extended forces. The enemy could very easily trade space for time, and unfortunately for the invaders, the defenders knew all too well exactly how much time that was. For the Germans, the speed required to not only advance but also maneuver meant that operational pauses needed to be accounted for in their planning in order to regroup and most importantly, refuel their mechanized forces. Taken together, space, time, and force presented the planning staff with considerable obstacles to overcome, for if the operation stalled for any reason, the results could be catastrophic.

After analyzing the operational factors and ignoring what Hitler ordered them to ignore, the German General Staff proposed a sequenced approach to the invasion. First, the fielded forces would sever Russian supply routes vis-à-vis the Don and Volga Rivers and encircle the Russians on the steppes where the Germans would have an advantage with armor and tactics. Second, the 11th Army would capture Sevastopol and the Crimea and ultimately link up with the drives coming down through the Ukraine into the Caucasus. Army Group A's initial objective was the capture of Rostov at the mouth of the Don River, and Army Group B's initial objective was the capture of Voronezh. Third, the three groups would secure and consolidate a line from Rostov to Stalingrad. Once these intermediate objectives had been met, the three forces would wheel south and push towards the oil fields around Grozny. A thrust towards the Caucasus was anticipated but plans for it were not worked out in detail in the spring of 1942 due to the complexity of the operation to first secure the Donets Basin and the Don-Volga land bridge.¹⁶ This was the best the staff could produce given the nebulous objectives. All they could expect was that careful phasing and economy

¹⁶ Schroter, *Stalingrad*, 22.

of effort would increase the chances of success and hopefully impart devastating effects on the overall ability for Russia to sustain its forces and economy.

Despite what has been identified as failures in the foundation of the planning process, it is impossible to determine if BLUE had any chance for success. The Russians were caught largely unprepared for the initial onslaught, but Hitler undermined his own forces by changing his objective and introducing more error into an already flawed solution. On July 11, 1942, two weeks after the campaign started, he issued Fuhrer Directive 43, which tasked von Manstein with attacking into the Caucasus after securing the Crimean Peninsula no later than August 1, 1942.¹⁷

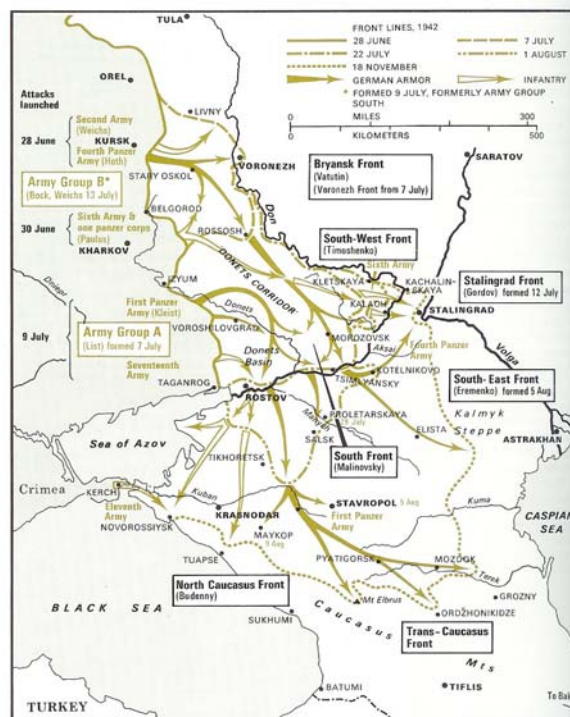


Figure 2 Subsequent changes to the ambiguous objective defined in Fuhrer Directive 41 resulted in concurrent rather than sequenced attacks during OPERATION BLUE. Stalingrad became the primary objective despite no deliberate planning to attack the city.¹⁸

¹⁷ Trevor-Roper, *Blitzkrieg to Defeat – Hitler’s War Directives 1939-1945*, 123.

¹⁸ Richard Natkiel, *Atlas of Battles*, (London: Bison Books, Ltd, 1984), 92.

Not satisfied with progress around Voronezh, Hitler fired Field Marshal von Bock and replaced him with General von Weichs on July 13.¹⁹ Eight days later, he issued Fuhrer Directive 44, which contradicted Directive 41 and ordered operations to resume along the northern front based on his assumption that the occupation of the Caucasus was a foregone conclusion. Hitler claimed victory despite the fact that not a single German soldier had set foot on the oilfields.²⁰ On July 23, 1942, less than four weeks after the campaign had started, Hitler issued Fuhrer Directive 45 claiming that, “In a campaign which has lasted little more than three weeks, the broad objectives outlined for the southern flank of the Eastern front have been largely achieved. Only weak enemy forces from the Timoshenko Army Group have succeeded in avoiding encirclement and reaching the further bank of the Don.”²¹ His conclusions about collapsing enemy resistance were based on his false beliefs that the Russians were withdrawing into the Caucasus rather than eastward towards the Don and Volga Rivers. Therefore, rather than encircling the Red Army as he had originally envisaged, he inadvertently allowed it to trade space for time and the majority of the Russian forces slipped away to the east. Moreover, if Hitler truly believed that his objectives had been met then he should have reconvened his leadership and started the planning process for follow-on operations. Had he included Stalingrad in his original objectives and properly staffed the planning process he might have defeated the Russians in the south, or at the very least avoided the disastrous defeat.

¹⁹ Jukes, *Hitler's Stalingrad Decisions*, 43.

²⁰ Trevor-Roper, *Blitzkrieg to Defeat – Hitler's War Directives 1939-1945*, 127.

²¹ *Ibid*, 129.

Deliberate planning for the capture of Stalingrad never took place. Hitler's greed and impatience prompted heated arguments with General Halder and his staff, and despite Halder's vehement protests based on professional expertise, Hitler changed the overall scheme of operation. Ultimately, he completely bypassed his senior leadership and never informed General Halder of his intentions. Because there was no theater commander to coordinate forces, the army was unprepared for the changes Hitler made after he refocused BLUE on Stalingrad. Discarding the carefully sequenced operations of the original plan, he transferred the 4th Panzer Army from Group B to Group A and ordered the simultaneous advance towards both the east and the south.²² This change in force removed the quick striking power from Army Group B and left Sixth Army alone to plod towards Stalingrad, which Hitler suddenly announced as the primary objective of the campaign. Immediate problems pertaining to C2 and logistics became evident as the 4th Panzer Army requisitioned the majority of fuel intended for Army Group B as a whole, and then became hopelessly tangled with other mechanized units in the confusion of the sudden redirection.

Fuhrer Directive 45 spelled the doom for OPERATION BLUE. By ordering the simultaneous advance across the entire front rather than wait for the flank along the Don to be secured, Hitler defied the factors of space and force and diluted his forces to dangerously weakened levels. "What he was attempting would rapidly expand the front into a massive 1,500 mile salient stretching from Orel through Stalingrad, south through the area of the Groznyy oilfields, and then back again along the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains to the Sea of Azov".²³ Because he no longer considered the Caucasus the overall objective, Hitler

²² Tarrant, *Stalingrad*, 35.

²³ *Ibid*, 30.

transferred the 11th Army and its five divisions to Leningrad at the critical moment when their strength was needed to capture the oil fields.²⁴ Additionally, he transferred Fourth Panzer Army back to Army Group B.²⁵ Fourth Panzer Army had already wasted precious quantities of fuel pushing hard towards Rostov only to be turned around and sent towards Stalingrad after achieving nothing in the south. During this time Hitler became frustrated with the failure to encircle the Red Army, relieved both Halder and List, and personally assumed command of Army Group A.²⁶ Army Group B, with the addition of the Eight Italian, swelled to six armies under the command of von Weichs. This enormous responsibility exceeded his effective span of control, further adding to the list of calamitous events that spelled doom for the Sixth Army and its coalition partners.

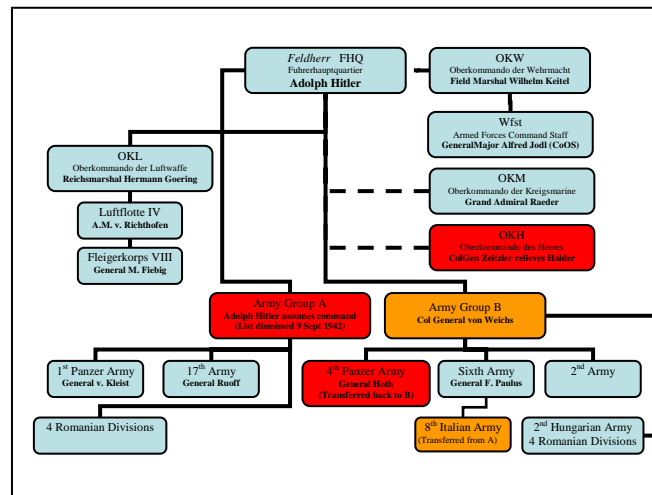


Figure 3 Command and Control relationships in September 1942. Hitler assumed command of Army Group A, further weakening the "grotesque" chain of command.

What is truly remarkable about the failure of BLUE is that Hitler, as the operational commander, could not follow his own strategic guidance or make sense of his own objectives. Hitler's inexorable obsession with a Germanic Empire that spanned the entire

²⁴ William Craig, *Enemy at the Gates*, (New York: Penguin Putnam, Inc., 1973), 21.

²⁵ Jukes, *Hitler's Stalingrad Decisions*, 47.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 69-74.

breadth of Europe and Russia clouded his ability to differentiate reality from fantasy. Operational art is designed to separate the two. Since he defined the objectives and dominated the command and control structure, the only remaining step that could have salvaged the plan was proper analysis of the operational factors. The lopsided space-force ratio coupled with a pure force on force comparison should have been enough to highlight the weaknesses of the plan.

If Hitler had followed the guidance suggested in this paper he could have been victorious in Southern Russia or at least avoided the disastrous outcome. First, he could have made his primary objectives the cities of Rostov and Stalingrad and phased his operations to account for the Russian winter. Both of these geographically important cities were the keys to controlling the Don and Volga Rivers. Had he focused on this task first, the oil fields in the Caucasus would have been isolated by the severed lines of communication and German forces could have taken them after the front had been stabilized. Second, the command and control needed to be subjugated to a theater commander. Furthermore, to compensate for the size of the front and the forces committed, three additional layers of command should have been added to the command and control architecture. The eastern front should have been divided into two separate theaters, north and south, or BARBAROSSA and BLUE. Beneath them, since air, ground, and naval forces were operating jointly, individual component commanders should have been added to coordinate and lead the different aspects of the operation. If Hitler's intent was to hold operations in BARBAROSSA, then that command would have assumed a supporting role to BLUE and all efforts should have been focused on

destroying the Russian army as laid forth in the original objectives. As it existed, both fronts were competing for limited resources.

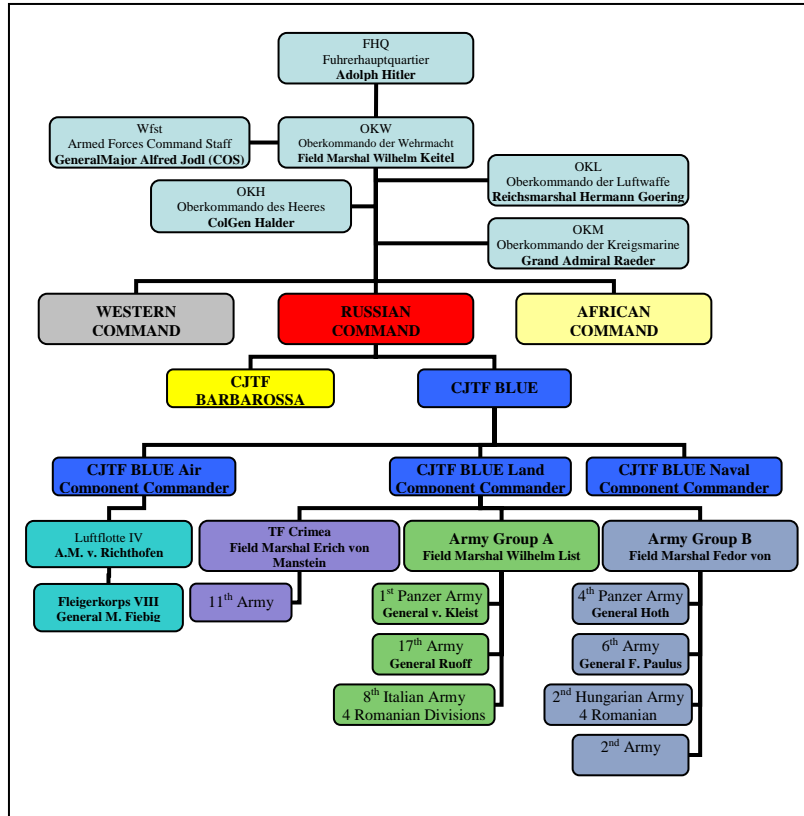


Figure 4 Proposed command and control structure for OPERATION BLUE

Finally, Hitler should have reduced the size of the space he was attacking and improved his space-force ratio. The Russians were caught unprepared by the speed of the attack at the onset and Stalingrad could have been captured with ease in mid-July. The city's vital industrial capacity and transportation links were critical components of Russia's war effort, and the loss or destruction of the city would have opened the passage down the Volga to the Caspian Sea and Grozny. If the Germans had succeeded in trapping large numbers of Russian forces in the open steppes, controlling the land bridge between the Don and Volga, and destroying Stalingrad by September, they could have adequately prepared for the winter

and concentrated on preventing reinforcement by the Russians coming from Siberia.

Ultimately, the objectives needed to be clearly defined and then pursued by professionals who understood how to achieve them through the application of operational art.

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