

The First Battle of Kiev

author: Charles River Editors

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Synopsis

authori¼š	Charles River
readByi¼š	Mark
inLanguagei¼š	english

In the warm predawn darkness of June 22, 1941, three million men waited along a front hundreds of miles long, stretching from the Baltic coast of Poland to the Balkans. Ahead of them in the darkness lay the Soviet Union, its border guarded by millions of Red Army troops echeloned deep throughout the huge spaces of Russia. This massive gathering of Wehrmacht soldiers from Adolf Hitler's Third Reich and his allied states - notably Hungary and Romania - stood poised to carry out Operation Barbarossa, Hitler's surprise attack against the country of his putative ally, Soviet dictator Josef Stalin.

The Soviets were so caught by surprise at the start of the attack that the Germans were able to push several hundred miles into Russia across a front that stretched dozens of miles long, reaching the major cities of Leningrad and Sevastopol in just three months. The first major Russian city in their path was Minsk, which fell in only six days. In order to make clear his determination to win at all costs, Stalin had the three men in charge of the troops defending Minsk executed for their failure to hold their position. This move, along with unspeakable atrocities by the German soldiers against the people of Minsk, solidified the Soviet will. In the future, Russian soldiers would fight to the death rather than surrender, and in July, Stalin exhorted the nation, "It is time to finish retreating. Not one step back! Such should now be our main slogan. ... Henceforth the solid law of discipline for each commander, Red Army soldier, and commissar should be the requirement - not a single step back without order from higher command."

Backed by extremely shrewd and professionally executed logistics arrangements based on rapidly-advanced railways, Army Group Center plunged forward through Minsk, then Smolensk, like an arrow aimed at Moscow, a crucial Soviet rail hub and manufacturing center. The Wehrmacht's leadership initially tasked Army Groups North and South with guarding the flanks of Army Group Center. They, too, smashed forward through Soviet defenses, but only

as secondary operations supporting the main thrust. </p> <p>However, as the Germans began taking Smolensk, Hitler suddenly diverted significant forces to the northern and southern flanks. Heinz Guderian's Panzer Group found itself sent to assist in the Ukraine rather than smashing directly through to Moscow. The diversion of this force increased the scope of the Kiev encirclement and the eventual haul of prisoners, but Guderian himself opposed it: "Hoth and myself - in contradiction to this - were anxious to continue the advance eastwards with our panzer forces according to the original, expressed intentions of the supreme command, and to capture the objective initially assigned to us." (Guderian, 1996, 166-167). </p> <p>Despite the logistical difficulties generated by the new emphasis on a rapid advance in the south, and the stubborn, courageous, but disastrously uncoordinated resistance of the Red Army, the Germans succeeded in winning the gigantic struggle for Kiev and the Ukraine. While the First Battle of Kiev represented an operational triumph for the Germans, resulting in an astounding number of Red Army prisoners and the complete collapse of the Ukraine's defenses, the victory came at a high price. Hitler's diversion of Heinz Guderian's Panzer Group II south from the Army Group Center Schwerpunkt increased the power and effectiveness of the Kiev encirclement, but cast away the near certainty of taking Moscow itself in August. Meanwhile, for their part, the Soviets tried hard to forget the disastrous battle ever occurred, going so far as to omit its mention in subsequent histories of the war. </p>

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