The subjugation of Poland within four weeks was the prelude to Hitler’s campaign of conquest throughout Europe. In a series of blitzkrieg offensives, German forces quickly occupied the Benelux states, Denmark, Norway, and France. Hitler’s plan for a reordering of the continent under German hegemony – a plan that envisaged the incorporation of large parts of Western Europe and some sections of Poland into the Reich – seemed to be becoming a reality. In the meantime, Stalin had begun appropriating as much Eastern European territory as he possibly could without precipitating a break with Hitler. Thus, he annexed Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia in August, along with Bessarabia and parts of Finland. But while Stalin was taking advantage of this opportunity to expand his sphere of power, Hitler was preparing to crush his Russian ally. After the defeat of France and the withdrawal of British troops from the European continent, Hitler believed the time was right for a historic confrontation with the Bolshevist archenemy. On December 18, 1940, he issued “Directive No. 21 Operation Barbarossa” to the leadership of the Wehrmacht, giving the order to prepare for an offensive war against the Soviet Union the following year.

DIRECTIVE No. 21: OPERATION BARBAROSSA

The German Wehrmacht must be prepared to crush Soviet Russia in a quick campaign (Operation Barbarossa) even before the conclusion of the war against England.

For this purpose the Army will have to employ all available units, with the reservation that the occupied territories must be secured against surprises.

For the Luftwaffe it will be a matter of releasing such strong forces for the eastern campaign in support of the Army that a quick completion of the ground operations can be counted on and that damage to eastern German territory by enemy air attacks will be as slight as possible. This concentration of the main effort in the East is limited by the requirement that the entire combat and armament area dominated by us must remain adequately protected against enemy air attacks and that the offensive operations against England, particularly against her supply lines, must not be permitted to break down.

The main effort of the Navy will remain unequivocally directed against England even during an eastern campaign.
I shall order the concentration against Soviet Russia possibly 8 weeks before the intended beginning of operations.

Preparations requiring more time to get under way are to be started now – if this has not yet been done – and are to be completed by May 15, 1941.

It is of decisive importance, however, that the intention to attack does not become discernible.

The preparations of the High Commands are to be made on the following basis:

I. General Purpose:

The mass of the Russian Army in western Russia is to be destroyed in daring operations, by driving forward deep armored wedges, and the retreat of units capable of combat into the vastness of Russian territory is to be prevented.

In quick pursuit a line is then to be reached from which the Russian Air Force will no longer be able to attack the territory of the German Reich. The ultimate objective of the operation is to establish a cover against Asiatic Russia from the general line Volga-Archangel. Then, in case of necessity, the last industrial area left to Russia in the Urals can be eliminated by the Luftwaffe.

In the course of these operations the Russian Baltic Sea Fleet will quickly lose its bases and thus will no longer be able to fight.

Effective intervention by the Russian Air Force is to be prevented by powerful blows at the very beginning of the operation.

II. Probable Allies and their Tasks:

1. On the wings of our operation the active participation of Romania and Finland in the war against Soviet Russia is to be expected.

The High Command will in due time arrange and determine in what form the armed forces of the two counties will be placed under German command at the time of their intervention.

2. It will be the task of Rumania to support with selected forces the attack of the German southern wing, at least in its beginnings; to pin the enemy down where German forces are not committed; and otherwise to render auxiliary service in the rear area.

3. Finland will cover the concentration of the German North Group (parts of the XXI Group) withdrawn from Norway and will operate jointly with it. Besides, Finland will be assigned the task of eliminating Hangö.
4. It may be expected that Swedish railroads and highways will be available for the concentration of the German North Group, from the start of operations at the latest.

[...]

IV. All orders to be issued by the Commanders in Chief on the basis of this directive must clearly indicate that they are precautionary measures for the possibility that Russia should change her present attitude toward us. The number of officers to be assigned to the preparatory work at an early date is to be kept as small as possible; additional personnel should be briefed as late as possible and only to the extent required for the activity of each individual. Otherwise, through the discovery of our preparations – the date of their execution has not even been fixed – there is danger that most serious political and military disadvantages may arise.

[...]