

PROLOGUE



At 3:30 A.M. on the morning of June 22, 1941, German armed forces invaded the Soviet Union along a two-thousand-mile front, beginning the largest and deadliest military campaign in history. Within a matter of weeks, more than a million Soviet men, women, and children would be killed. The campaign would eventually stall, Napoleon-like, in the bitter winter outside Stalingrad, but not before many millions more had died.

Hitler had been rather jittery in the weeks leading up to operation *Barbarossa*. In his diary entry for the morning of the invasion, Joseph Goebbels, the Third Reich's minister of popular enlightenment and propaganda, wrote that only after the invasion had begun would the Führer again become calm, as if a burden had been lifted from his shoulders. Goebbels was very close to Hitler, delighting in the precious hours he spent "eye to eye" with the man he called "a genius" and "the greatest commander of all time." The propaganda minister stayed up late with his beloved Führer that predawn morning, pacing back and forth for hours in the huge salon of the Reichskanzlei.

What did these two men talk about, only hours before the beginning of the operation designed to reduce Slavs to slaves and to acquire *Lebensraum* for Germans in the depopulated East? Goebbels's diary reveals that the two men worked on Hitler's speech announcing the invasion and debated also the precise timing of its broadcast (final decision: 5:30 A.M. that morning). Both lamented the treachery of Rudolf Hess, the Führer's former deputy and successor, who only weeks before had parachuted into England to try to bargain a separate peace with Churchill. Both men marveled at the historic magnitude of the imminent invasion, the explosive surge that would redraw the map of Europe and extirpate the "cancerous tumor" of communism.¹