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Schemers and Planners

The Abwehr was for me the most sad and disappointing military organization which I have known as a soldier. (Wilhelm Kuebart)¹

It is difficult to examine German military strategy as an influence on the direction taken by German covert operations in the Persian theatre and on the Allied response to them, because there was essentially no grand strategic concept in Berlin, from the very beginning to the bitter end of the Second World War. Indeed, there was in Nazi Germany no single, central military authority that could have worked out and coordinated an overall strategy. What passed for strategy was in fact a haphazard series of empirical judgements and situational responses, either steeped in political ideology or based on nothing more than operational pragmatism on the part of Adolf Hitler, a self-appointed, dilettantist military commander, not a trained strategist. Therefore, in this context, the term strategy describes nothing grander than the planning of operations at the army, corps, and divisional levels, and might be seen by some as synonymous with the term operational strategy or even operational tactics.²

For the purposes of this study, the highest-level strategic document to have survived the war is Hitler’s War Directive No. 32, issued on 11 June 1941, on the eve of his invasion of the Soviet Union, in which he outlined his post-BARBAROSSA plan for the Middle East, including the use of Persia as a stepping stone to the rest of the region. ‘The possibility of exerting strong pressure on Turkey and Iran improves the prospect of making direct or indirect use of these countries in the struggle against England. … The struggle against the British positions in the Mediterranean and in Western Asia will be continued by converging...
attacks launched from Libya through Egypt, from Bulgaria through Turkey, and in certain circumstances also from Transcaucasia through Iran. ... If the collapse of the Soviet Union has created the necessary conditions, preparations will be made for the despatch of a motorized expeditionary force from Transcaucasia against Iraq."3

In terms of global operational strategy, however, before the reversal of German fortunes in North Africa and at Stalingrad, it is important to recognize the paramount and realistic priority Adolf Hitler accorded to operations on his southern flank – in the Ukraine and in southern Russia. Oil was the determining factor, so significant that its consideration directly led Hitler in July 1942 to commit one of his worst errors of judgement in splitting his Russian offensive into two synchronous but geographically divided partial drives, one towards the Volga and the other towards the Caucasus.4 This ‘operationally wrong decision’5 by the German commander-in-chief came about because he was convinced that the most important strategic objective of the Eastern campaign was to conquer the Caucasian oil wells before any Allied initiative could be launched in the West. Two months later, with his great summer offensive (Operation BLAU) bogged down and the few captured oilfields damaged and unproductive, Hitler realized the impossibility of fulfilling his strategic goals. Yet, only a month before, on 5 August, with the rapid advance of German forces in the southern Soviet Union continuing, he had appeared full of optimism. According to the official German history, ‘the closer this advance got to its objective, the more intensively did he once more consider a southward extension of the Caucasus thrust in order to strike directly at the British Empire. “We must at all costs,” he once more affirmed ... , “get down into the Mesopotamian plain and get the oil at Mosul away from the British. Then this whole war will be over”.’6

If Albert Speer is to be believed – and there are some who would dispute this7 – Hitler sat beside Speer one ‘peaceful’ evening in August 1942 on a bench outside Hitler’s Vinnitsa lodge and confided in him ‘in a cool, mathematical tone’ his oil-driven strategic vision, so soon to be abandoned, saying: ‘For a long time I have had everything prepared. As the next step we are going to advance south of the Caucasus and then help the rebels in Iran and Iraq against the English. Another thrust will be directed along the Caspian Sea toward Afghanistan and India. Then the English will run out of oil. In two years we’ll be on the borders of India. Twenty to thirty elite German divisions will do. Then the British Empire will collapse. They’ve already lost Singapore to the Japanese. The English will have to look on impotently as their colonial empire