Phillip Mendonça-Vieira 050600293

The battle of Stalingrad: a turning point?

As winter set in late 1941, it became evident that the Wehrmacht had failed to achieve Operation Barbarossa’s objective of a speedy destruction of the Soviet Union.

With dwindling resources and facing a multiple theatre war, Hitler thus faced an even greater need for a decisive victory. To this effect, during the summer campaign of 1942, he set out to seize control of the natural resource abundant region of the Caucasus and neutralize Stalingrad, a strategically located industrial zone. Though it was initially successful, ultimately the Wehrmacht fell prey to organizational disarray stemming from its overly ambitious goals, Hitler’s inflexibility, and the sheer unforeseen numerical superiority and relentlessness of the defending Red Army. The defeat at Stalingrad proved to be a devastating blow that revealed the inability of the German army to compete in the long run against the immense Red Army, and from that point onwards it became clear that the Eastern front was now reduced to a devastating war of attrition from which only the Soviets could emerge victorious.

As the Battle of Britain dragged on, the unexpected and successful resistance of the British throughout the summer of 1940 forced Hitler to choose between a continued cooperation with the Soviet Union and the alternative of a two front war. With a land invasion of Britain indefinitely postponed and the looming threat of the United States, the prospect of a long, drawn out war with the Western powers was becoming more and more likely. With the capitulation of France and the acquiescence of the Soviets to the East, the Nazi regime would be capable of dedicating its resources to its expansion in North Africa and its submarine warfare against Britain. Unfortunately for the Soviets, if Hitler had any settled aims at the beginning of the war, it was to eventually attack Eastern Europe under the guise of providing the German population with all of the liveable space east of the Urals. Furthermore, with the Russians out of the way, Germany would then be in control of all of the available resources in continental Europe and thus be free to face the Anglo-American coalition with confidence. Finally, since the Red Army could only grow stronger over time, any delays in Hitler’s ‘great and true task’ of destroying Bolshevism would only leave a Germany occupied in the West highly vulnerable to Russian threats (Parker 60). Under the assumption that the Soviet Union could be destroyed in a single military campaign, these proved to be irresistible arguments. After a brief diplomatic exploration, Hitler ceased to look for a compromise and on December 5th he told his service chiefs to attack Russia in the following May (Parker 60-63).

The invasion, codenamed Operation Barbarossa, began in earnest on June 22nd 1941 after a delay of four weeks, and was at first it was wildly successful. Seeking to destroy the main Russian forces in a series of deep encirclements as far east as possible, the achievements of the Wehrmacht in Russia were incomparable to those of any other land force in the history of war. The main attacks were launched by three German Army Groups, North, Centre, and South and within the first week the first great encirclement lead to the capture of 287,000 Red Army men, with 2,500 tanks and 1,500 guns in pockets around Bialystok and Minsk (Parker 63-68). Within the first two weeks of July, Army Group Center swept into central Russia and seized the cities of Orsha and Smolensk, capturing another 300,000 prisoners. Simultaneously, Army Group North rushed into Estonia and the outer defences of Leningrad, while Army Group South headed toward Kiev and the rich agricultural and industrial areas in the Dnepr. These dramatic victories gave the German leadership the impression that they were well on their way to destroying Soviet military power with one hard blow. Recognizing, but not fully understanding the implications of the determined fight most Red Army men put up, whether surrounded or being driven back, the Germans believed that they had won the critical battles and that little but mopping up remained to be done. The continuous successes of the troops at the front all but confirmed the assumption that the campaign would be a short one.  As a result, no replacements were planned, or made available, for either personnel or equipment after the first few weeks. The Luftwaffe expected to be back fighting the British after two months in the East and most of the anti-aircraft guns were in Germany or in the West in any case. For a short time it looked as if the War in the East had been won, and that Germany held free-reign over Russia's territory. (Weinberg 264-266).

However, contrary to German expectations, the Red Army did not collapse and indeed the determination of its men steadily grew. As knowledge of the deliberate shootings and starving of Soviet prisoners increased so did the resolve of the officers and soldiers of the Red Army (Weinberg 300). By February 1942, of the 3.9 million Soviet soldiers captured the vast majority, some 2.8 million, were dead. In spite of the enormous losses of men and equipment suffered by the Russians, the Soviet system was clearly holding together and there was both a continuing front and a steady, if not massive, stream of new formations and replacements. By the first week of August, it was beginning to be recognized that the Caucasus in the south and Murmansk in north would probably not be reached in 1941 and that the campaign could be expected to continue into the following year. German units had to be refurbished, and during the ensuing pause of late July and August, decisions had to be made as to the direction of the next offensives in the East (Weinberg 268-269). While the German High Command wanted to concentrate its forces in a push towards Moscow, under the assumption that its strategic and symbolic importance would force a decisive battle, Hitler disagreed (Parker 68). After some hesitation, Hitler decided to transfer some of the forces away from Army Group Centre to assist in the attacks against Leningrad in the north while Army Group South was directed to take Kharkov and advance to Rostov in order to occupy the Crimea (Weinberg 270). The ensuing encirclement manoeuvres yielded another enormous victory for the Germans, trapping five Russian armies for a total of another 665,000 prisoners (Parker 70). With the return of these units, the push towards Moscow was resumed in the first week of October. In two great armoured breakthrough and envelopment operations, the Germans destroyed the major Soviet forces on the Central front, capturing another 600,000 prisoners as they moved to within 50 miles of Moscow. (Weinberg 272).

As German announcers proclaimed final victory and the Soviet government evacuated most agencies from the capital, German offensive strength waned. Rain and heavy use had turned Russian roads into mud and the frontline troops found themselves too far from existing railways to mitigate their lost or worn out equipment, heavy casualties and the high level of exhaustion among the soldiers still fighting. As a result, the German offensive in the north sputtered out in the December snows. After some initial retreats the Russians held fast and in the south they forced the Germans back out of Rostov (Weinberg 272). These prior and somewhat successful Soviet counter-attacks meant that the stretched out German forces on the Central front, exhausted and at the end of their own unsuccessful attacks towards Moscow, could not count on any substantial reinforcements from the other segments of the front (Weinberg 292). Early in November the German attack halted as frost and extremely cold weather set in, interfering with machinery and reducing mobility and combat effectiveness. On December 5th 1941 the Third Reich had reached the limit of its expansion as the German offensive ended, and the Russian counter-offensive began (Parker 71).

Operation Barbarossa had taken the Soviet Union by surprise. If the German leadership had imagined Russians to be inferior Slavs led by incompetent Jewish Bolsheviks, Stalin had been similarly blinded by his own ideological preconceptions (Weinberg 278). Incapable of imagining why the Germans might risk a two-front war, Stalin rejected all warnings of German plans for an attack and insisted into the early hours of the invasion that the Red Army hold its fire under the assumption that the Germans were staging a provocation (Weinberg 278). Numbering roughly 5.5 million men on June 22nd 1941, the Red Army’s force was large and imposing on paper. However, size alone could not compensate for its inflexible command structure, shortsighted strategic leadership and its ill-trained and ill-equipped soldiers in the field. War quickly proved it to be a cumbersome and inept military force incapable of contesting the more tried and tested Wehrmacht. Consequently, the German armed forces savaged the Red Army. Faced with a seemingly never ending string of catastrophes, the Soviets recoiled and traded territory and soldiers’ lives for time (Glantz 135-136).

Several issues compounded the Red Army’s dismal combat performance in the first six months of the campaign. Of primary concern is that Russia possessed an inadequate set of defence plans, which played directly into the hands of the Germans. Not only was planning in depth disregarded because it was seen to be defeatist, but the major defensive field works and positions along the USSR’s 1939 border were stripped clean for a concentration of Soviet forces in its newly acquired territories. Complicating matters was the constant interference of Stalin in military affairs (Weinberg 278-279). Joseph Stalin, dictator of all of Russia, stood like a colossus over the Soviet war effort. Having achieved power in the early 1930’s by ruthlessly purging and destroying all of his potential political challengers, immediately after the German invasion he quickly became the supreme high commander of the Soviet Armed Forces and never once relinquished his iron grip on the levers of power (Glantz 369-370). Determined to prevent the Germans from obtaining control of the economic riches of western Russia, as crisis engulfed the Soviet Union he rejected what was, militarily, the most effective strategy for defence. Instead of allowing most of European Russian to be overrun by the Germans and keeping Soviet forces intact for when German supply lines became over extended, Stalin instead adopted a strategy of “forward defence” that proved disastrous (Parker 139). However, the biggest contributing factors to Russian defeats were the acute shortages of trained, experienced and competent command cadre and staff officers at virtually every level of command. A natural consequence of both Stalin’s deliberate and devastating purges of the Red Army’s officer corps, from 1937 through 1941, the purges removed about 50,000 of the Red Army’s finest and most accomplished commanders. The purges also guaranteed that most surviving officers were now paralyzed by fear and unwilling to reach independent decisions in the face of higher authority. As a result, the army lacked 35 per cent of its required officers by May 1940, and about 70 per cent of its command cadre had served in their current duty positions for six months or less (Glantz 466-467).

Soviet resistance continued in spite of the frightful losses it suffered in the first six months of fighting. Even though they had lost most of their agricultural and industrial capacity, to say nothing of their supply of workers and potential soldiers, the remaining ability of the Soviet Union to produce needed war materiel was much greater than the Germans had ever imagined. Having initiated major industrial developments in the Urals and portions of Central Asia and Siberia during the 1930s, the Soviet Union possessed a substantial base for continued industrial production (Weinberg 280-281). As the German invasion progressed, many Russian machines and workers underwent an impromptu evacuation to the east and by 1942 Soviet factories actually made more weapons than they had before the invasion began (Parker 139). More importantly, while over the course of 1941 the Soviets would come to lose over four million soldiers, they also possessed a reserve pool capable of fielding about twelve million men. Although their mobilization system was slow and cumbersome, once set in motion it was inexorable, producing wave after wave of new armies just as the Germans were convinced the Soviets were down to their last battalions (Glantz 135-136). As the Red Army learned from its brutal experiences, the Soviet forces hastily threw together new defensive positions and eventually orderly if rushed movements of forces to the front and reluctantly ordered pull-backs began to replace confusion (Weinberg 280). If over the same time period the German forces had suffered relatively little, losing a sixth of their original force or 560,000 men, they crucially also lacked any significant number of reservists to replace them with (Parker 70).

The Soviet counter attack in December 1941 surprised the Germans. Urged on by Stalin and a sense of uplift that accompanied the largest Soviet offensive of the war to date, Russian troops smashed the German advance units and quickly threatened to cut off and destroy large portions of the German forces that had come closest to Moscow (Weinberg 292). In bitter fighting, the Germans were steadily driven back with heavy losses in men and materiel, but nowhere in the winter offensive of late 1941 and early 1942 were the Soviets capable of securing a decisive victory (Parker 108). As the spring mud reduced mobility, both sides now looked ahead to the 1942 summer campaign. While Stalin and most of his military leaders believed that the main offensive would be targeting Moscow and allocated their resources accordingly, Hitler looked on to the Caucasus (Weinberg 297, 299). Unable to make up for its losses in both men and equipment and restore the army to its June 1941 strength, Hitler faced two clear choices: either remain on the defensive in the Eastern front or launch an offensive in a single sector. Faced with the possibility of finally seizing the oil resources of the Caucasus and the subsequent relief it would bring to the other theatres while depriving the Soviet Union, Hitler ordered Army Group South to encircle and destroy the Russian forces west of the River Don and head south into the Caucasus (Weinberg 409-410).

The main German offensive, named Operation Blau, began on June 28 at the northern end of Army Group South, but the result was not what the Germans expected. The Russians weren’t fighting as effectively as in prior winter counter offensives and some 200,000 Soviet units were trapped, but this was no repetition of the 1941 encirclements. The Red Army leadership managed to learn a great deal in the hard school of battle, but, more importantly, where Stalin was learning to listen to his advisors Hitler began to exert more immediate control over the operation (Weinberg 414-415). Though Stalin had a ‘no retreat’ order read out to the troops in late July, withdrawal was no longer totally prohibited in the same manner as in 1941 and at last the Red Army was allowed to trade space for time. The Germans managed to once more conquer huge tracts of territory but this time destroyed comparatively few Soviet units (Parker 108-109). Hitler, on the other hand, thought that the USSR had been dealt a crushing blow and believing that the goals of the summer offensive had been reached for the most part, issued new operational orders (Weinberg 415). Army Group South was split into two army groups, ‘A’ to capture the Caucasus and ‘B’ to clear the Don bend and advance on to Stalingrad, an important industrial and communications centre. Although Hitler had actually reduced the effectiveness of the offensive by starting the southward move to the Caucasus prematurely, by this stage German forces seemed triumphant (Parker 109).

By September, however, the German advance had come to a stop. The Wehrmacht had been able to advance hundreds of miles because the Red Army was still retreating, but now the balance began to shift. As the distances between German units grew greater and greater so did their supply difficulties and before long the two Army Groups ceased to be mutually supporting as their lines of communication became incapable of sustaining their forward echelons (Parker 109). On its side, the Supreme Soviet Command poured more and more forces against the German armies concentrated at Stalingrad. Stalin had decided to do everything possible to hold the city and, acting on advice from his generals, had plans developed for a huge pincer operation named Uranus that would strike out of the Don bridgeheads in the north and cut off the German force battering their war forward inside Stalingrad (Weinberg 424-424). For nearly three months a continuous and ferocious battle was fought for control of the city. In close quarters the Germans lost most of the advantage of their superior tactical skill and slowly and agonizingly they set about clearing the town street-by-street and house-by-house (Parker 110). Hitler’s insistence to drive into the Caucasus at the same time as he pushed the offensive toward Stalingrad had made it impossible to keep substantial numbers of Germans protecting the flanks, and in mid November the Soviets launched their counter-offensive. Unwilling to credit the Russians with the ability to conduct such an operation, the Germans were caught by surprise and the entire 6th Army was surrounded, cutting off 200,000 troops (Weinberg 449).

After weeks of hardship, savage combat and a failed airborne supply attempt, the local German commander surrendered on February 1st 1943 and of the 100,000 German troops taken prisoner few would ever return to Germany. Another great German offensive was yet to come, but the Soviet Union was now destined to survive (Parker 111-112). In terms of its ultimate impact on the outcome of the war, the victory proved to be decisive. Unable to replace the armies lost at Stalingrad or conduct successful offensives without them, Hitler could not hope to win the war on any terms (Glantz 48). The ensuing balance of force on the eastern front ruled out a third attempt at a great German offensive to win the war at a stroke and from this point onwards Germany was on the strategic defensive. Hitler’s remaining hope was to separate the allies by convincing Stalin that the destruction of Germany would require unacceptable efforts (Parker 112).

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