1. The battle of Stalingrad: a turning point?

Intro

* Circumstances leading up to battle in Moscow
  + German supremacy
  + Allied weaknesses
* Campagin in Moscow
* How did it begin
* Why?
  + Hitler is like bitches we gotta kill us some slavs, especially fore the yankees get in this war
* Forces leading up to battle – Germans v. Soviets
* Beginning of the battle
  + After failure of BR, Operation Blau starts, sweeping victories across the caucases, race to reach oil fields just around Stalingrad, siege proper
* Pivotal point
  + What caused the Germans to start losing?
    - I can’t remember, maybe cos they underestimated Russian forces
    - They got circled and cut off from their supply lines and starved until they were forced to surrender
  + How did the Soviets take advantage of this?
    - Rape via encirclement
* WHY is this a pivotal moment?
  + After Stalingrad it was obvious for everyone involved that germany could not win the war, and all fighting from this point on was entirely to prolong the conflict and make a surrender on nicer terms more likely
  + How did this damage the German forces?
    - rape
  + How did this boost the Allied forces?
  + What implications did this have for the rest of the war?
    - Russian offensive in 1944 happened on anniversary of op BR, and simultaneous with DDay
  + Can you draw an underlying theme from this battle as it pertains to the war as a whole?
* Conclusion
  + Restate the importance of this battle.

Despite having conducted one of the most successful military campaigns in history, as winter set in late 1941 and early 1942, it became evident that the Wehrmacht had failed to achieve Operation Barbarossa’s objective of a speedy destruction of the Soviet Union. As their lack of winter preparedness increased their casualties, and the frigid temperatures blunted superior German mobility and skill, the three Army Groups found themselves at standstills throughout Eastern Europe. Where Army Group North was stuck in the siege of Leningrad, and Army Group South was forced to retreat from Rostov, Army Group Center’s overstretched line of supply was forcing it to retreat from it’s tantalizingly close position to Moscow.

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. Making the case for extending the partnership with Russia was the fact that, 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 its lumbering neighbour to the East, the Nazi regime would be capable of dedicating its resources to its expansion in North Africa and its submarine warfare seeking to defeat Britain in the Battle of the Atlantic. Unfortunately for the Soviets, if Hitler had 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. 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. (pg60-63)

The invasion, codenamed Operation Barbarossa, began in earnest on June 22 1941 after a delay of four weeks, and was at first wildly successful. Seeking to destroy the main Russian forces in a series of deep encirclements as far east as possible before ultimately forming a barrier against Asiatic Russia along a line from Archangel to the Volga, by any standard of military accomplishment 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, Center 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. (pg63-68). Within the first two weeks of July, Army Group Center swept into central Russia and grabbed another 300,000 prisoners even as it seized the cities of Orsha and Smolensk on the road to Moscow. 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 at the very top 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 and correspondingly, no replacements were made available or planned 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 at home 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 Germans were free to do whatever they wanted. (pg 264-266)

It was during this euphoric period that Hitler decided to expand his plan of wholesale slaughter of the Jewish population of Europe. Having already decided to dispose of the racially inferior Slavic population of his recently subjugated empire via either mass starvation or slave labour, the plans to kill certain categories of prisoners of war were being implemented. By February 1942, of the 3.9 million Soviet soldiers captured the vast majority, some 2.8 million, were dead. From the first days of the invasion Jews were being targeted and by the end of July thousands of Jews were being killed daily. When it became obvious that these massacres ran into little resistance from the military (and were often assisted and even urged on by them), the heady days of victory in July provided the opportunity to extend this process both to the rest of the territory that would be occupied by German forces and to the whole of German controlled Europe. Although mass shootings always remained a significant element in the process, they soon proved to be too laborious and more efficient methods of disposal were quickly invented. In the fall of 1941 the construction of large special facilities for large scale murder, first tried out on Russian prisoners of war, had begun and before long the process of moving large quantities of Eastern European Jews and killing them was industrialized. (pg . 267, 301)

However, contrary to German expectations, the Red Army did not collapse and indeed the determination of its men steadily grew. The encirclements and forward thrusts of the German mobile forces had to be followed up by the infantry, trudging ahead on foot, before rear areas could be made secure. (parker pg68) 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 yet massive, stream of new formations and replacements. By the first week of August it was beginning to be recognized that the Caucasus and Murmansk 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. (berg 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 pg 68) Choosing to advance in the south rather than leave their flank in the center exposed, after some hesitation, Hitler decided to transfer some of the forces away from Army Group Center to assist in the attacks against Leningrad in the north (berg pg 270) while Army Group South was directed to take Kharkov and advance to Rostov in order to occupy the Crimea. 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, they moved within 50 miles of Moscow. (berg 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. The German offensive in the north sputtered out in the December snows as the Russians held fast after initial retreats and in the south they were forced back out of Rostov. (berg 272) These prior and concurrent limited but 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. (berg 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 5 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. 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. (berg 278) As large and imposing as the Red Army’s force was on paper, numbering roughly 5.5 million men on June 22 1941, size alone could not compensate for its ill-trained and ill-equipped solders in the field and its inflexible command structure and shortsighted strategic leadership; 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 and the Soviets, faced with a seemingly never ending string of catastrophes, recoiled and traded territory and soldiers’ lives for time (glanz 135-136).

Several issues compounded the Red Army’s dismal combat performance in the first six months of the campaign. To begin with, they 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 (berg 278-279). Joseph Stalin, dictator of all of Russia, stood like a colossus over the Soviet Union’s 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 (glanz pg 369-370). The biggest contributing factor to Russian defeats, however, 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, in addition to removing 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 (glanz 466-467).

Soviet resistance continued in spite of the frightful losses it suffered in the first six months of fighting. While over the course of 1941 the Soviets would come to lose over four million soldiers and much of their industrial and agricultural capacity, they also possessed a reserve pool capable of fielding about 12 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 (glenz 135-136). Assisted by tens of thousands of civilians, the Soviet forces hastily threw together new defensive positions and orderly if rushed movements of forces to the front and reluctantly ordered pull-backs eventually began to replace confusion. In the process they steadily inflicted losses on the Germans, who could ill afford them (berg 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).

Even though the ra was able to halt the Wehrmacht’s advance on Leningrad, Moscow, Rostov in dec 41, albeit with tremendous exertions and at staggering human and materiel cost and was able to organise a strat offensive of its throughout the first period of the war the strategic initiative remained predominantly in german hands/ their tactical and op mil skills far exceeded those of the red army and the rigos or incessant combat the vastness of the threatre of ops and the harshness of the climate had not yet significantly dulled the cutting edge of german mil power.

Hastily assembled reserves valuable given the attrition that afflicted the whermacht during its final thrust towards Moscow, by November first it had lost fully20% of its committed strength (686,000 meng), up to two thirds of its 1.5 million motoer vehicles and 65% of its tanks pg18

(the very fact that they could no longer continue in a 3 pronged attack establishes that the original plan had failed pg269

pg300 – must quote on stalin looking humane)

(things slow down then segueway into red army, having heard rumours of the death became more determined)

With the failure of Operation Barbarossa to achieve a complete victory over the USSR, Hitler in late 1941 faced an even greater need for a decisive victory that would allow him to plunder the natural resources necessary to consolidate his power over Europe and establish a stronghold in the continent formidable enough to dissuade the United States and the British Empire from escalating their struggle. To this effect, during the summer campaign of 1942, he set in motion Operation Blau which sought to neutralize Stalingrad, a strategically located industrial zone as well as a propaganda coup, and seize control of the oilfields in the Caucasus. Although it was initially very 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 battle over Stalingrad, which cost millions of lives and levelled the city, ended with surrender of over 200,000 Axis troops and in a decisive victory for the USSR. This defeat proved to be a devastating blow from which the German army never recovered, and from this 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.

In particular, the battle over Stalingrad, which cost millions of lives and where over 290,000 Axis troops were encircled and forced to surrender in February 1943, proved to be a decisive victory for the USSR. From that point onwards, the German army never regained the strategic initiative and it became clear that the collapse of the Nazi regime was only a matter of time.

It becomes clear upon analysis of the German failure in Moscow that this was a pivotal moment in the war, shifting the balance of power in favour of the Allies, and rendering defeat as only a matter of time for the Axis forces.

overstretched line of supply forced them to stop tantalizingly close to the center of Moscow and left them at the mercy of a series of desperate Soviet counterattacks.

New operations after the spring thaw enables Germans to fight in their advantage.

Where Army Group North was occupied in the siege of Leningrad and Army Group South was forced to back out of Rostov in the Caucuses, Army Group Center

, once briefly within grasp of Army Group Center, was now becoming more and more unattainable as the Wehrmacht was slowly pushed back in a series of vicious wars of attrition, left unable to engage in the kind of mobile warfare it excelled in by the frigid winter conditions.

was now unattainable as the frigid weather restricted the Wehrmacht’s ability to engage in the mobile warfare it excelled in preparation left it’s troops

With the failure of operation Barbarossa to strike a decisive blow against the Soviet Union by the beginning of the winter of 1942,