

SOVIET UNION IN WORLD WAR 2

A CAPTIVATING GUIDE TO LIFE IN THE SOVIET UNION AND SOME OF THE MAIN EVENTS ON THE EASTERN FRONT SUCH AS THE BATTLE OF STALINGRAD, BATTLE OF KURSK, AND SIEGE OF LENINGRAD



CAPTIVATING HISTORY

INTER WAR

THE RUSSO-FINNISH WAR
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ON WORLD WAR 2
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WORLD WAR II



CAPTIVATING HISTORY

The Eastern Front

*A Captivating Guide to Soviet Union in
World War 2, the Winter War, Siege of
Leningrad, Operation Barbarossa and
Battle of Stalingrad*

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Table of Contents

Part 1: Soviet Union in World War 2

Introduction

Chapter 1 – Before the War

Chapter 2 – Stalinism

Chapter 3 – 1938 and 1939

Chapter 4 – Interlude

Chapter 5 – Barbarossa

Chapter 6 – War of Extermination

Chapter 7 – The Major Battles

Conclusion

Part 2: The Winter War

Introduction

Chapter 1 – The Grand Duchy of Finland

Chapter 2 – The Finnish Civil War

Chapter 3 – Between a Rock and a Hard Place

Chapter 4 – The Red Menace

Chapter 5 – Negotiations, “Refresher Training,” and the Balance of Forces

Chapter 6 – The Greatest Finn of All Time

Chapter 7 – Hell in the Snow

Conclusion: Defeat but Not defeated

Part 3: Leningrad

Introduction

Chapter 1 – Before the Siege

Chapter 2 – Horror Approaches

Chapter 3 – The Plan

Chapter 4 – Attack

Chapter 5 – Civilians and Defense

Chapter 6 – The Battlefield

Chapter 7 – Inside the City

Chapter 8 – The Road of Life

Chapter 9 – Stalin Returns to His Old Methods

[Conclusion](#)

[Appendix A: Forces of Army Group North at the beginning of Barbarossa through July/August 1941](#)

[Appendix B: Soviet forces, first months of Barbarossa to late fall 1941](#)

[**Part 4: Operation Barbarossa**](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter 1 – Nazis and Communists](#)

[Chapter 2 – Invasion](#)

[Chapter 3 – All Seems Lost](#)

[Conclusion](#)

[**Part 5: Stalingrad**](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Timeline](#)

[Chapter 1 – Before the Battle](#)

[Chapter 2 – *Fall Blau* \(“Case Blue”\)](#)

[Chapter 3 – The slaughter Begins](#)

[Chapter 4 – Soldiers and Generals](#)

[Chapter 5 – Schlacht an der Wolga](#)

[Chapter 6 – The Germans Get Beaten at Their Own Game](#)

[Conclusion](#)

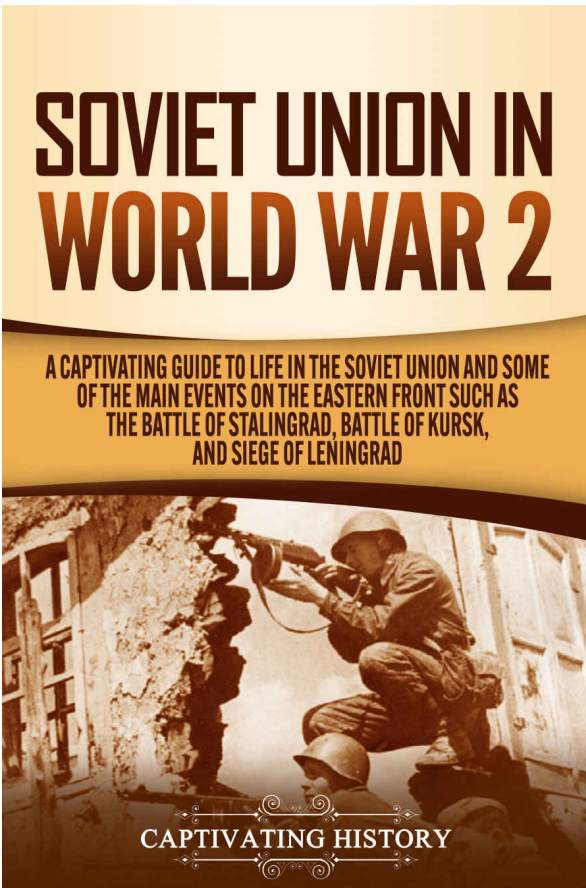
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[References](#)

[Bibliography](#)

Part 1: Soviet Union in World War 2

A Captivating Guide to Life in the Soviet Union and Some of the Main Events on the Eastern Front Such as the Battle of Stalingrad, Battle of Kursk, and Siege of Leningrad



Introduction

One can bear anything, the plague, hunger and death, but one cannot bear the Germans. One cannot bear these fish-eyed oafs contemptuously snorting at everything Russian. We cannot live as long as these grey-green slugs are alive. Today there are no books, today there are no stars in the sky, today there is only one thought: Kill the Germans. Kill them all, and dig them into the earth. Then we can go to sleep. Then we can think again of life, and books, and girls, and happiness. We shall kill them all. But we must do it quickly or they will desecrate the whole of Russia and torture to death millions more people.

—Excerpt from an article in the Soviet paper Red Star (Krasnaya Zvezda) by writer Ilya Ehrenburg

No nation suffered more losses during the Second World War than the Soviet Union. The figure most historians recognize as roughly accurate is twenty million. The exact figure is impossible to tally for a number of reasons: destroyed records, inexact pre-war records, Soviet politicization of the population figures before and after the war, and much more. No matter what the exact total was, what is known is that the Soviet population only recovered its losses from the war in the late 1950s.

For those of you unfamiliar with WWII, the combined losses sustained by the United States and Great Britain were just over 800,000 dead. The Soviets lost that many people during the Siege of Leningrad alone.

This is an introduction to life in the Soviet Union right before and during the war. This e-book is meant as a brief overview and introduction to World War II on the Eastern Front. At the end of the book, you will find a short list of some of the thousands of books and articles available on the subject, which will help give you a much deeper understanding of this tragic but fascinating subject.

Chapter 1 – Before the War

In 1917, the Bolshevik (“majority”) wing of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party staged a revolution that established communism as the system of government in the capital city of Petrograd (it was later known as Leningrad from 1924 to 1991 and is known as St. Petersburg today). The revolution quickly spread to Moscow, and in a short period of time, the Bolsheviks (known as the “Reds” for their banners, which were red for the color of the workers’ blood) and the Whites (for the color of royalty, as they supported the old aristocratic regime led by the tsar and his family, the Romanovs) were at each other’s throats.

Between 1918 and 1922, the Red and White Armies fought a bloody civil war, which cost millions of lives. During the conflict, the Bolsheviks executed the tsar and his family and eventually emerged victorious. The world had its first communist government.

Leading this new government was Vladimir Lenin, the organizer of the revolution and the political theorist behind the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), which was what the Bolsheviks had evolved into. Lenin’s ideas were based on the readings and beliefs of the German political philosopher Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820–1895), the founders of communist theory.

To briefly sum up, communists in the 19th century (when Marx and Engels were writing) believed society would evolve from its present capitalist form to communism. According to Marxist theory, communism would occur naturally, as it was a political evolution of human society. When it did, economic classes would disappear, as would private property and ownership of the means of production (factories, mines, etc.) When pure communism was attained, all people would be equal in a workers’ state. Marx and Engels believed the movement toward communism would first take place in Western Europe, which had industrialized first and seen the greatest societal disruption. Neither Marx nor Engels spoke much about agricultural peasants, which made up most of the population of the Soviet Union and many of the nations of Eastern Europe.

For many in Russia and elsewhere, the Industrial Revolution only made ancient inequalities worse. And it wasn’t only the old nobility who oppressed those at the bottom. It was also the growing middle class, which consisted of industrial owners, as they were eager to set themselves up in

the trappings of the aristocracy (mansions, furs, jewels, etc.) by exploiting the labor of the working classes.

So, for Lenin and his comrades, communism wasn't something they could wait for. To them, the working classes (including the peasant class in the vast Russian countryside) had suffered enough, and rather than wait on history to guide them into communism, they would take history by the hand and lead it into a system of government in which there were no upper or lower classes—just workers in a workers' state.

Lenin and his compatriots, which included such men as Leon Trotsky (who organized the Red Army) and Josef Stalin, then set about radically changing society in what they called the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (the USSR).

Within a short period of time, they confiscated virtually all private property, especially the larger businesses and factories in the cities. Much of the larger landholdings in the countryside were seized as well. Many of those in the upper classes who had not fled during the Russian Civil War did so now. Many thousands who did not were imprisoned or executed for being “enemies of the people.” Those who were “lucky” simply had their property seized and lived under suspicion as “class enemies” for most of their lives.

Such a radical change did not come without consequence. Though industrial output grew at first, it soon stalled. Farmers hid their crops rather than sell them at controlled prices. People went hungry and began to complain. In some cases, such as among the soldiers and sailors at the base at Kronstadt in March 1921, rebellions occurred. As a result, Lenin backpedaled a bit and began his New Economic Policy (NEP), which allowed private owners of small businesses and farmers to sell their remaining crops (some had to be given to the state) at market prices. Lenin meant for this to be a temporary solution until a more organized and socialistic one could be developed.

The NEP caused a split within the Communist Party, with some believing it to be helpful and others believing it to be a betrayal of true communism. The question was solved with the Lenin's death in 1924, who passed away after a series of strokes.

In Lenin's will, he specifically said that Stalin should be removed from his high position in the Communist Party. Lenin viewed him as too coarse, calculating, and brutal. Though not highly thrilled with Trotsky either,

Lenin preferred him over Stalin. However, Stalin managed to alter Lenin's will, making it seem as if he was Lenin's first choice. When the truth came out sometime after Lenin's death, it was already too late. Stalin had occupied some of the lesser-known but more important positions within the country and in the Communist Party, and he put his own men in charge of the police, security, and other departments throughout the nation.

By 1929, Stalin had won his war for power over Trotsky and his allies. Trotsky fled the country (only to be assassinated on Stalin's orders in 1940), and his allies either swore allegiance to Stalin or were, in the dreadful parlance of the time, "liquidated"—killed.

Although Stalin was the main power within the Soviet Union by the early 1930s, he still had rivals. Some of them were Old Bolsheviks, those who had taken part in the Russian Revolution and been friends with Lenin. Among these men were Nikolai Bukharin, Lev Kamenev, and Grigori Zinoviev. Other powerful figures were younger men who had come up after the revolution, the most notable of which was Sergei Kirov (whom the famous Kirov Ballet is named after).

In 1934, Stalin, jealous of Kirov's popularity and growing power, had him assassinated. Of course, the assassination was made to look like the work of a disgruntled former party member, who was said to have blamed Kirov for his failures. The death of Kirov, which Stalin organized via his secret police and for whom he was a seemingly shocked pallbearer, gave Stalin the chance to solidify his power.

In 1934, the first "Great Purge" began, in which hundreds of thousands of people were arrested for being "enemies of the people." Thousands more were executed for either being linked to Stalin's rivals or being in opposition to his plans and government policies.

The purge of 1934 cemented Stalin's place at the top, but most of those arrested, sent to the Gulag (Stalin's notorious system of labor camps), or killed were mostly lower-level functionaries, with some exceptions like Kirov. In 1937, Stalin officially began what is known to history as the Great Purge or the Great Terror.

In 1937, Bukharin, Kamenev, and Zinoviev were put on trial. These were publicized show trials in which all three openly admitted that not only were they working against Stalin, but they had also been agents of capitalism and/or plotters with Trotsky for almost their entire lives. These men were

threatened with the deaths of their families, and they were beaten and psychologically tortured behind the scenes. In front of the camera and radio microphones in the court, they admitted their “guilt.” All three were convicted and executed.

Also caught up in Stalin’s power grab and paranoia was Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky, a military hero of the Russian Revolution and Russian Civil War. He had the strength (forces within the Red Army) and the popularity to be a real threat to Stalin. No evidence has ever linked Tukhachevsky to any plot against Stalin, but at his “trial” in 1937, he admitted to plotting capitalist governments to overthrow Stalin. He, too, was executed.

This leads us to events that were to have dire consequences on the Soviet Union’s preparedness and abilities when Hitler invaded in 1941. While Stalin was eliminating his political enemies, he began to purge the armed forces’ leadership, removing virtually all of the high command of the Red Army (also known as the Stavka).

Out of 80,000 officers in the Red Army, some 35,000 fell victim to Stalin. Many of them were killed. Others were sent to the Gulag, where many more died. The lucky ones “retired” and lived in exile. And this wasn’t confined to just the lower officer ranks. Three of the five marshals of the Soviet Union (the highest-ranking officers in the country) were killed. All 11 of the deputies to the Commissar for War, 75 of 85 corps commanders, 110 of the 195 divisional commanders, and all of the flag ranks of the navy were killed. Officers were also punished. Sometimes they were shot, sometimes imprisoned, and sometimes forcibly retired.

As a result of the Great Purge of 1937, Stalin held complete military and political power. No one was willing to take the initiative within the armed forces since it might displease Stalin. No one wanted to “stand out”; an old Russian adage says, “The nail which stands out always gets hammered down.” This means that when war came, the Red Army was paralyzed, both literally and psychologically.

apter 2 – Stalinism

In 1933, Adolf Hitler came to power, and within a short time, he began to roll back the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, which ended World War I. This treaty put limits on the strength of the German armed forces. At first, this effort was secretive. Strangely enough, the nation that helped Hitler hide his efforts (especially in the area of aircraft development and pilot training) was the Soviet Union.

In return for German expertise in other areas (such as manufacturing and fine tool making), the Soviets opened secret air bases to the Germans and sold massive amounts of agricultural products to Hitler. Their ideological differences were overlooked for the moment, but it put Nazism and communism on a collision course.

In 1935, Hitler announced that Germany would reintroduce conscription and enlarge the army to 500,000 men from the Versailles-limited 100,000. While there were people in the West who were alarmed at Germany's rearmament (most notably Winston Churchill), many people had come to believe that the Treaty of Versailles had been too harsh on Germany. Some also believed that the financial terms placed on Germany were a contributor to the Great Depression.

Another reason many in Western Europe and the United States turned a somewhat blind eye to Hitler's rearmament program was that they believed Germany could be used as a bulwark against the Soviet Union. After all, in Hitler's speeches and in his book *Mein Kampf*, he rails against communism repeatedly and calls for Germany to gain *Lebensraum* ("living space") in the vast plains of the western Soviet Union.

During the 1930s, Stalin went to elaborate lengths to make the world believe the Soviet Union was indeed the "worker's paradise" the communists aimed for it to be. The Communist International, or Comintern, was an organization of communists from countries around the world that was commanded by Moscow. They had agents in Western Europe, America, and elsewhere influencing newspapers and other media to include information about the USSR making unheard-of strides in areas such as industry, agriculture, and equal rights. Soviet propaganda, both at home and for foreign audiences, showed happy workers delivering tons of coal, creating hydro-electric dams, having the latest consumer goods, and being on the cutting-edge of aviation (which, at the time, represented modernity).

The truth was somewhere in between. Journalists and diplomats in the Soviet Union were restricted to Moscow and the bigger cities, such as Leningrad. When they were taken out into the countryside, it was on carefully managed tours of the new collective farms—farms, which were run by tightly controlled soviets (“councils”) and which had both abolished private property and increased production greatly.

In various large projects (especially dams, power plants, and bridges), foreigners saw the Soviets advancing by leaps and bounds. This was true to a large degree, though any improvement on what had existed under the tsars would’ve been thought “miraculous.” For all its size and resources, Russia was a poor country in the years after the Russian Revolution.

New housing blocks were built in the cities, which included fancy Western-style hotels that foreigners used when they came to visit (they were *always* under surveillance by the secret police). It seemed as if the populations of the cities were living, or on their way toward living, lives much like those in Western Europe, except without the issues of “class” and prejudice.

However, in many of those housing blocks, workers lived in crowded conditions and had virtually no privacy. The secret police (at that time known as the NKVD) were everywhere and had informants in every building and in all the workplaces. Neighbors ratted out neighbors for anything, whether it was real or made up, to get revenge for some slight or to gain a promotion. Throughout the 1930s (especially from the years 1936 to 1938), people were taken away in the middle of the night in black cars that had their windows painted over (some called them “the ravens” for the carrion-eating bird). They were often never seen again.

Their destination was most often the Gulag—that is if they survived the interrogation, which always asked for “names.” They wanted the names of people who denigrated Stalin, other high officials, the system, and the revolution. They wanted those who complained about shortages, work, and living conditions.

One story out of millions will convey the reality of living in Stalin’s Soviet Union. Victor Herman, an American of Russian descent, traveled with his father, mother, and sister, along with a contingent of Ford workers, to train Soviets at a new auto plant in the USSR in 1931. Victor’s father, a socialist, had fled Russia before the revolution and was eager to return to what he believed was now a “worker’s paradise.” He applied for Soviet citizenship

for his whole family, unbeknownst to his son, who would have objected. Victor was a natural athlete and eventually set the world record for the highest parachute jump in 1934. When asked to sign a paper to authenticate his record, he noticed his citizenship was “Soviet,” and he refused to sign. Soon, he was on his way to prison, and then found his way to the Gulag (for *Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerei*, or “Main Camp Administration”). The Gulag was Stalin’s system of labor/concentration camps strung out by the hundreds across the USSR, although they were mainly in the cold of Siberia. Victor’s existence was a nightmare of torture, starvation, and being surrounded by death. In his travels, he met a man who had been arrested because his neighbor had overheard him talking in his sleep against Stalin. He had literally been arrested for having an anti-Stalin dream. Victor Herman never gave up his dream of returning to the United States, which he finally did in 1977.

The Gulag provided millions of workers for projects throughout the Soviet Union, mostly in mines, lumber forests, and dam building. Safety was not an issue unless it really impacted production. The prisoners were there to work and to die. No one knows the exact total of deaths and executions that happened in the Gulag and Stalin’s prisons, but even the lowest estimates have it in the millions.

The foreigners were shown what Stalin wanted them to see. When they visited a collective farm, they would see happy workers and bountiful crops. Some of those were real, as the government poured inordinate amounts of resources into making them appear successful, but this was not sustainable for the entire nation. Many times, crops would be brought in from other farms and loaded onto trucks and sorting tables for guests to see. Workers were told to smile and be “happy,” although they didn’t need to be told as they knew what awaited them if they didn’t.

The movement toward collective farming was not easy. For one, they were almost always mismanaged by teams of Stalinists who knew nothing about farms. In many parts of the country, farmers, especially “middle-class” farmers, known as *kulaks*, who had been allowed to keep some private property under Lenin, refused to allow their lands and animals to be seized and collectivized. Hundreds of thousands of them were sent to the Gulag. Others were left to beg on the streets. The public was urged to see them as “class enemies,” and they were encouraged to ostracize and report them for

any small infraction. Tens of thousands were shot, but not before many of their animals were killed in spite.

The suppression of the *kulaks* and the mismanagement of the collective farms caused a famine to break out in 1932/33, especially in Ukraine. This was partially caused by Stalin, who wanted Ukrainian nationalism crushed, as it was strong in many parts of Ukraine. Stalin also needed to feed his cities, and so what crops did grow were taken to Moscow and other cities. This ensured two things: the cities would not go hungry and revolt, and the foreigners would see food on the shelves.

Making matters worse, Soviet grain collectors were responsible for collecting quotas of grain based on the old records. They would go to an area and gather every last seed and grain. However, even after doing this, the grain collectors still would not have enough. So, they fudged their numbers. This happened up and down the line, as no one wanted to report bad news to the top. As a result, Stalin took the grain for the major cities, often believing there was enough food to go around. When reports came in stating there wasn't enough found, that author would take a one-way trip to Siberia. The famine, which took mainly place in Ukraine and in other areas such as Kazakhstan, resulted in millions of deaths. Estimates run between three and twelve million, with the real number likely near five million.



Illustration 1: Dead and dying people in Kharkiv (Kharkov), Ukraine, 1933 (By Alexander Wienerberger - Diocesan Archive of Vienna (Diözesanarchiv Wien)/BA Innitzer, Public Domain,

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=3120021>).

Still, despite these horrors, by the end of the 1930s, the Soviet Union had grown richer and more powerful. Factories had popped up everywhere (most of them in the west of the country where most of the population lived and which was most at risk from invasion). Hydro-electric dams and power plants spread electricity to parts of the nation that had never had it before, allowing work to go on beyond sundown. And by the end of the 1930s, the USSR was self-sufficient in foodstuffs, though barely. For many people, life had indeed gotten better. As long as you kept your head down and didn't complain, you'd be okay.

The drive to radically change the face of the nation meant that throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s, the growth and development of the Red Army were put on the relative back-burner. Until the late 1930s, Stalin faced no realistic foreign threat to his rule. The Red Army was large enough to maintain order and put down any insurrections, and while its generals planned massive offensives in case of war, the risk to the USSR was minimal during the world's recovery from WWI and the Great Depression.

The Soviets had always spent a large percentage of their annual budget on the armed forces. The Russian Civil War and the military intervention by Great Britain, France, and the United States in the area near Murmansk (undertaken ostensibly to support the Whites; nothing really came from this operation other than casualties and the everlasting suspicion of every Soviet leader until Mikhail Gorbachev) made the Soviets believe that only a well-armed state would prevent their system from falling to the capitalists. Obviously, this suspicion went both ways, but the anti-Soviet propaganda in the West only increased their wariness toward the communist country.

In the table below, you can see Soviet expenditure on the armed forces as a percentage of their budget. The years 1926 and 1929 through 1932, which was the height of the Depression, are not included here, as the data available is only partial and sporadic. Neither is the data for 1939, the year WWII began.

| | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|------|------|------|--|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 1922 | 1923 | 1924 | | 1925 | 1927 | 1928 | 1933 | 1934 | 1935 | 1936 | 1937 | 1938 |
|------|------|------|--|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|

| | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|------|------|------|--|-----|-----|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 15.6 | 14.5 | 12.3 | | 3.4 | 9.1 | 11.1 | 16.1 | 16.5 | 18.7 | 25.6 | 32.6 | 43.4 |
|------|------|------|--|-----|-----|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|

By contrast, in 2019, the figures for the US, China, and Russia are 3.4 percent, 2.0 percent, and 3.9 percent, respectively. You can see that the Soviet Union was spending extraordinary amounts of money on arms in the years before the war. You most likely noticed when the amount began to increase: 1933—the year Hitler came to power.

apter 3 – 1938 and 1939

As you may know, by 1938, Hitler was ready to put his plans for the domination of Europe into action. He had already remilitarized the Rhineland (an area of Germany that had been ordered by the Allies at the end of WWI to be free of German troops). He had won a special election in 1935 and restored the Saarland (one of the nation's leading coal-producing areas, which had been under Allied control since the end of WWI) to Germany.

When the Allies did not stand up to him as he moved his forces into the Rhineland (and German forces were under orders to retreat if they did so), Hitler was even more certain that France and Great Britain would not risk another war unless they were attacked directly. World War I and the Great Depression had made them timid.

In Moscow, Stalin saw Hitler's plan unfolding, and he noted the lack of Western response.

In the spring of 1938, after years of machinations by Austrian Nazis under orders from Berlin, Germany annexed Austria, something politicians in the West had said they would do anything to prevent. They did nothing except condemn the move "in the strongest language," as diplomats put it.

Next on Hitler's list was an area of the new nation of Czechoslovakia, which had been formed in 1918 after the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire after WWI. In the north and west of the country lived a sizable ethnic German population known as the Sudeten Germans. Though there was some prejudice directed against these people by the Czechs, Hitler greatly exaggerated the problems and threatened to invade the area if they were not resolved. Over a period of months, Hitler and the Sudeten Nazis did everything in their power to make the situation worse, not better. Nazi troops massed on the border. The British and French were alarmed, and their politicians had many opinions about what to do, which is exactly what Hitler hoped for. The more opinions, the less likely something would happen.

The Czechs and Slovaks are Slavic people, as are the Russians and many others in Eastern Europe. Historically, Russia was seen by the smaller Slavic nations as sort of a "big brother" they could lean on when times were hard. It was a position that the tsars and even Stalin relished, as it gave them

greater influence in Europe. Stalin made it clear to the British and French that if they guaranteed to attack Germany when Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia, Russia would also go to war with Germany. In hindsight, which is always 20/20, this would have likely stopped Hitler in his tracks.

However, with memories of the carnage of WWI still in their minds and the Great Depression not yet over, the Western Allies sought to “appease” Hitler. British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and French Premier Édouard Daladier flew to Munich. Hitler was joined by his fascist ally, Benito Mussolini, the leader of Italy. Stalin was left on the sidelines. Not a single Czechoslovakian attended the Munich Conference, which took place from September 29th to September 30th, 1938.

After a series of hurried talks, it was decided the Czechs must give up the Sudetenland to Hitler. The Czechs’ army was only strong enough to hold off Hitler if Allied help came. Since it wasn’t, the Czechs were left alone and betrayed. Knowing it was a lost cause, they gave in to Hitler’s demands and moved their troops out of the Sudetenland. In March of 1939, Hitler moved his troops into the rest of Czechoslovakia. No one lifted a finger to help.

Neville Chamberlain went home and declared he had achieved “peace in our time.” Winston Churchill, on the other hand, condemned the Munich Agreement as a defeat. Hitler told Mussolini, “We have met our enemy and they are worms.” Stalin realized he could not count on Britain and France at all, so he determined to come to an arrangement with Hitler.

With increasing intensity through the rest of 1938 and into 1939, Hitler began complaining that the sizable German minority in Poland, especially in the “Free City” of Danzig (today’s Gdansk, Poland), was being mistreated and deprived of their rights.

Poland, like Czechoslovakia, came into existence after WWI. Within the country’s borders, especially in the west, was a minority German population. Additionally, at the end of WWI, the Allies determined that the German state of East Prussia would be separated from the rest of Germany by a strip of land that became known as the “Polish Corridor.” This was done to give Poland access to the Baltic Sea. In truth, it was a peculiar situation, as Prussia was like an island, separated from its homeland.

Hitler called for the elimination of the Polish Corridor and better treatment of Germans within Poland. If things didn’t change, he would invade Poland.

By this time, the United Kingdom and France had realized the grievous error they had made in Czechoslovakia, and they promised Poland that if Hitler invaded, they would go to war with Germany.

Hitler did not totally discount this, but he believed that if he could defeat Poland quickly, he would be able to shift enough troops to the west to prevent the British and French from taking any meaningful action. Hitler's big worry was the Soviet Union.

Though Poland had been recently restored in 1919 due to the Treaty of Versailles, it had an ancient history. For a time in the late Middle Ages, Poland had been a world power. The Poles were fiercely independent and were the sworn enemies of both Germany and Russia, two of the three countries (the other being Austria-Hungary) that had conquered Poland. Altogether, these three countries ruled over Poland for a combined two centuries, beginning in the early 1700s. Although the Poles welcomed the British and French guarantees of assistance, they would have likely fought Hitler without them.

Poland's eastern border was Russia's western border. Though not a friend to the Poles, Stalin would have much rather had a weak Poland on his border than a strong Germany. Having already seen the lack of willpower of the British and French in the Czech crisis, Stalin made a surprise and secret overture to Hitler.

On August 23rd, 1939, the Soviet and Nazi governments announced to a shocked world that they had just signed a ten-year non-aggression pact. With this move, everyone knew Hitler had just been given a free hand to deal with Poland, as he did not have to worry about Soviet interference.

Of course, there was much more to the Nazi-Soviet Pact (sometimes referred to as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact for the USSR's and Germany's foreign ministers, respectively). Within the agreement were secret protocols. In these secret agreements, Stalin and Hitler agreed to split Poland between them. Additionally, Stalin would not have to worry about German interference if (which was more like when) he invaded the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. These were new nations created after WWI that were formerly a part of the Russian Empire. Bessarabia and two other regions of Romania would go to Stalin. Hitler wanted much of Poland and Warsaw, and to do that, he agreed not to interfere in any designs

Stalin had on Finland, which had also been a part of the pre-WWI Russian Empire, as well as and a former German ally.

Not only were the countries of the world shocked, but communists around the world were too. On August 22nd, they denounced Hitler and the Nazis as the greatest criminals in history. On August 24th, they received directives to cease all anti-Nazi propaganda.



Illustration 2: Contemporary cartoon depicts the Nazi-Soviet Pact as a soon-to-be troubled marriage.



Illustration 3: Using the same names they had called each other for years, Hitler and Stalin greet each other over a fallen Poland.

The Nazi-Soviet Pact also called for the Soviets to send massive amounts of grain, raw materials, and other natural resources to Germany in exchange for German machinery, technical knowledge, and engineers. On the day the Nazis attacked Stalin in 1941, they passed trains heading the other way with grain bound for Berlin.

Hitler invaded Poland on September 1st, 1939. France and Great Britain declared war on Germany two days later. On September 17th, the Red Army invaded eastern Poland, and by September 27th, the Polish government had surrendered. Though the Soviet Union suffered the greatest number of dead during WWII, no nation suffered more than Poland. Nearly 20 percent, which equates to one in five Poles, died during the war. This figure includes the Jewish population that suffered as well, which was an astounding 90 percent.

In June of 1940, Stalin invaded the essentially helpless Baltic states. In all of the areas taken by the Soviets, the same horrible purges and terror that had gripped the USSR in the 1930s began. In the Baltics, Stalin's tactics later drove much of the populace into Hitler's waiting arms, with horrible consequences for everyone. In Poland, terror swept the part of the country under Stalin's control. In just one instance, over 20,000 Polish army

officers, politicians, and prominent personalities were executed by the Soviets at Katyn in eastern Poland.

On November 30th, 1939, Stalin attacked Finland. For months, Stalin and his foreign minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, had been demanding that the Finns cede land to the USSR as a buffer against a possible attack by Hitler. They were also worried that the Finns, who were somewhat friendly to Germany, would join Hitler in an attack in the Soviet far north and Leningrad. In fairness, Stalin offered the Finns a larger piece of Soviet territory than what he asked from them, but the territory he offered consisted of much snow and ice, whereas the land he demanded of Finland was strategically valuable.

The Finns refused. The short Winter War that followed was an embarrassment for the Red Army. On the Karelian Isthmus, which stretches north between the Baltic Sea and Lake Ladoga, the Soviets threw waves of ill-prepared and ill-equipped men against strong Finnish defenses. As a result, they were mowed down. To the north, in the pine forests of central Finland, highly trained, motivated, and well-led Finnish ski troops tore apart massive and less mobile Soviet formations.

By March, however, the Soviets had regrouped, replaced many of their leaders (which meant many were shot), and renewed their offensive. The Finns were forced to agree to Stalin's terms. At this point, Stalin was worried about the growing possibility of a German attack, despite his non-aggression pact with Hitler. So, he halted his offensive and made peace with Finland.

The Winter War was an embarrassment for Stalin and the Red Army, despite the improvements implemented at the end of the conflict. Hitler and the rest of the world saw what they believed to be a poorly led and poorly motivated Red Army. Many believe that this was the moment when Hitler decided to attack the USSR when he felt the time was right.

Europe was not the only place where the Red Army was engaged in combat. In the Far East, large Soviet formations (including a large number of tanks) were engaged with Japanese troops along the northern Chinese border and Mongolia along the Khalkhin Gol River from May to September 1939.

To give a brief summary, in 1931, Japan had conquered the semi-autonomous and resource-rich Chinese region of Manchuria. In 1936, the

Japanese began an invasion of China itself. The Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) believed that Japan's future lay on the Asian mainland with its wide, open spaces and natural resources (nickel, iron, timber, etc.—at that point in time, the oil resources of the area were relatively unknown). The Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) knew that oil and rubber were the keys to modern warfare, and they worried more about the forces of Great Britain and the United States in the Pacific than the Chinese or the Soviets. So, the IJN argued for expansion in the Pacific.

By the late 1930s, the Japanese army had gained control of the Japanese government to a large degree, and elements in the IJA in China operated with an amazing degree of arrogant independence. As had happened in China, Japanese troops provoked an incident with Mongolian/Soviet forces, and within a short period, a large-scale battle began.

Stalin sent General Georgy Zhukov (who would later become the preeminent military leader of the Soviet Union's war with Germany) to deal with the Japanese, along with sizable reinforcements. Zhukov was a ruthless commander who paid no real heed to casualties. However, he was also a student of war and had studied the latest books and papers that came out of the militaries of France, Great Britain, and Germany, which all asserted that massed and maneuverable armor would be the greatest factor of the next land war.

The resulting battle was a decisive victory for the Soviets and a humiliation for the Japanese. The Battle of Khalkhin Gol was lodged in Japan's memory so strongly that it was one of the primary factors in its decision to attack across the Pacific and into South Asia in the war to come. But though the Japanese rapidly decided they would not provoke the Soviets again, Stalin and the Red Army leadership remained wary of Japan and left sizable forces in the Soviet Far East rather than deploy them in Europe.



Illustration 4: Vladimir Putin and Mongolian President Khaltmaagiin Battulga view a painting of the Battle of Khalkhin Gol on the eightieth anniversary of the battle in 2019.

apter 4 – Interlude

When Stalin agreed to the non-aggression pact with Hitler in August 1939, he was under no illusion that the Soviet Union would eventually go to war with Germany. Stalin and Hitler had long railed against each other and their respective ideologies. There are various theories as to what Stalin's real beliefs were. At the end of this book, you will find a list of resources that will allow you to examine this question more closely. There are some rather unrealistic theories (such as Ernst Topitsch, who asserts that Stalin's pact with Hitler was part of a well-thought-out "master plan" to cause a devastating war in Europe, with Stalin invading after Europe had bled out). However, most historians agree that the purpose of the pact, at least for Stalin, was to buy time.

The Soviet Union was in a peculiar position when WWII broke out. Its armed forces were huge, but they were poorly led, disorganized, and paralyzed by Stalin's purges in the late 1930s. In 1940, the Soviets began producing two tanks that were better than anything the Germans had in the field at the time (the T-34 and the KV-1). The Soviet air force was gigantic but outdated. Soviet industry was growing by leaps and bounds by the late 1930s, but many people still had barely enough to eat. The Red Army was concerned about Hitler, but it was also faced with millions of Japanese troops in China.

Add to all of that (and more) was Stalin's paranoia. He sometimes believed his intelligence services and spies, but other times, he suspected them of incompetence or even treachery. He had hoped to form an anti-Hitler alliance with France and Great Britain before the Czech crisis of 1938, but he then turned against them in making the pact with Hitler. When intelligence reports from Churchill and others in the West warned Stalin about the forthcoming German invasion, he viewed them with suspicion, believing the "capitalists" wanted him to provoke a war with Hitler so that the West's two enemies, Nazism and communism, would destroy each other.

It's likely Stalin believed a war with Hitler was inevitable—that is, if he wasn't defeated by France and Great Britain, as many believed he might be. Though he was careful not to provoke an incident, Stalin abandoned the line of defenses in the western Soviet Union, known as the Stalin Line, and moved many of his troops into eastern Poland, the Baltics, and the border

with Romania (which allied itself with Hitler in the summer of 1940). Arms production increased, as you saw in the table in the prior chapter, more men were drafted, and the number of people in local militias rose.

Still, Stalin was explicit in his orders to his commanders—“do not provoke the Germans.” In the weeks before the German invasion in 1941, German reconnaissance planes blatantly crossed into Soviet airspace. Stalin warned his commanders against taking any action against them, and a warning from Stalin was *not* a suggestion.

On April 9th, 1940, Hitler invaded Denmark and Norway. Denmark fell in hours. Norway capitulated after heavy fighting on land and sea.

On May 10th, Hitler launched his invasion of Western Europe, attacking France, Belgium, and Holland simultaneously. The latter two countries fell in days. France fell in an astounding six weeks. The British Expeditionary Force was compelled to retreat back to England from Dunkirk and Calais. Even those who had predicted a German victory were stunned by the speed with which Hitler’s forces defeated the Allies.

Stalin was just as shocked, and when France fell, his orders not to provoke the Germans were emphasized.

Aside from the secret protocols that divided Poland and other parts of Eastern Europe, the Nazi-Soviet Pact included very favorable terms for both sides. By the beginning of the Nazi-Soviet war, Hitler would receive nearly one million tons of petroleum, over one and a half million tons of grain, and 140,000 tons of manganese, as well as smaller quantities of other raw materials.

In return, Stalin received technical schematics on the latest German warships, heavy naval guns, a wide variety of machines and machine tools as well, and experts to train Soviet engineers and workers. The pact was surprisingly well balanced, as both nations got what they needed. But as the date of Hitler’s planned invasion grew closer (which was originally set for May 15th, 1941), the Germans reneged on large parts of the agreement. Stalin was fully aware of this, yet the trains with Soviet grain and other materials kept flowing westward so as not to provoke Hitler.

The problem was that Hitler did not need a provocation.

apter 5 – Barbarossa

For many years, historians and laypeople interested in WWII believed that Hitler's planned offensive, codenamed "Barbarossa" (for the medieval Germanic king Friedrich Barbarossa), was delayed due to Mussolini's abortive invasion of Greece.

This invasion began without Hitler's knowledge in 1940. Mussolini's forces struggled to subdue the Greeks, and Hitler was forced to render aid to the Italians. In order to do so, German forces would have to pass through Yugoslavia, which had been friendly to Germany until March 1941, when a pro-Allied coup toppled regent Prince Paul and placed King Peter II on the throne. With that, Hitler was forced to invade both Yugoslavia *and* Greece. Both of these countries were in German hands in about a month, beginning in April 1940. However, both would become a thorn in Hitler's side throughout the war, particularly Yugoslavia, which drew hundreds of thousands of Nazi troops away from other fronts, particularly in the Soviet Union.

Despite the "side-show" in the Balkans, the real issue (as eminent WWII historian Antony Beevor and others have pointed out) was logistical. The Germans could not get the needed amounts of oil and fuel to the troops preparing to invade the USSR. There was also the problem of massive numbers of French trucks and tanks (many of which were excellent machines) being transferred to the East. It is estimated that when the invasion of the Soviet Union occurred, some 80 percent of their vehicles were French, as the French Army had neglected to destroy them before their surrender in 1940.

Hitler's forces were ready by late June, and on June 22nd, the largest military operation the world had ever seen began. Three and a half million German, Finnish, Romanian, Hungarian, and Italian troops poured across the borders of Poland, the Baltic states, and southern Russia/Ukraine, which was a front stretching some 1,800 miles from north to south. This force included some 6,000 tanks and other armored vehicles, 7,000 artillery pieces, and 7,000 mortars. Anywhere between 3,500 and 5,000 aircraft flew multiple sorties the first day.

Facing the Nazis and their allies were between 2.5 to 2.9 million Soviet troops, who had 11,000 tanks. Most of these vehicles were outdated, though sizable numbers of T-34s, KV-1s, and KV-2s surprised the Germans with

their strength, modern design, and firepower. The Soviet air force numbered nearly 11,000 planes, though the vast majority were outdated and obsolete. Over 30,000 artillery pieces were at or near the front. Unfortunately for the Soviets, many of these guns lacked vehicles or horses to move them and proved useless in a highly maneuverable war.

Just hours before the invasion began, a German sergeant with communist sympathies defected to the Soviets, warning them that Hitler was only hours away from attacking. He was roughly treated, and though many on the front lines believed him, the further back he was driven, the more and more he was treated with suspicion and disbelief.

The person in the greatest amount of denial was the one most people would think would be most suspicious of Hitler. Josef Stalin, perhaps the most paranoid and mistrustful man on Earth at the time outside of an asylum, could not wrap his mind around the fact that he had been played. After the first reports of the German attack reached Moscow, Stalin entered a mental state, which combined shock, disbelief, and depression, for hours.

Stalin had been warned of Hitler's plans by a number of sources. His military at the front sent reports of massive German troop movements. Diplomatic and intelligence officials in Europe sent reports to Moscow with grave misgivings. His spies all over Europe and in Japan told him a German invasion was imminent. Even Winston Churchill sent Stalin a cable warning him of Hitler's intentions. All of this was met with disbelief and doubt, as Stalin suspected a capitalist plot was in the works to provoke him into attacking Hitler, weakening both dictators so the "capitalists" could move in. After June 22nd, Stalin began to believe most of his intelligence agents and diplomats, but his confidence in them came gradually.

The people of the Soviet Union were not even told that their nation had been invaded until late in the evening of the 22nd. When the news was broadcast, it was not Stalin but rather Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov who informed them:

Our entire people must now stand solid and united as never before... The government calls upon you, citizens of the Soviet Union, to rally still more closely around our glorious Bolshevist party, around our Soviet Government, around our great leader and comrade, Stalin. Ours is a righteous cause. The enemy shall be defeated. Victory will be ours.

Stalin retreated from the Kremlin to his dacha (vacation retreat) in the forest. Stalin was known for his rough, vulgar language, and as he left the Kremlin, he was heard saying, “Everything’s lost. I give up. Lenin founded our state and we’ve fucked it up!” He issued vague orders for his forces to attack and then retreated into himself.

The Soviet leadership was so dependent on Stalin that for nearly eight full days, the Red Army was without any real leadership. No one wanted to risk his neck issuing orders in Stalin’s place. It was not until June 30th that the other members of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, along with Molotov and members of the military, visited Stalin in his home.

Some believe that Stalin was putting his leadership to the test. Who could he trust? Who might want to issue orders in his stead? Others say Stalin was simply suffering from nervous exhaustion. What we do know is that Stalin was scared—maybe for the first time in years. He later said he believed that Molotov and the others were there to arrest him. That was not the case, for the group told Stalin they believed that running the war effort needed to be handled by one man. The dictator asked them something along the lines of “Who did you have in mind?” Molotov replied, “You, Comrade Stalin.” With that, “The Boss,” as he was called by many, came back to life.

Almost two weeks after the German invasion, Stalin addressed the people of the Soviet Union in a long speech, evoking the spirit of 1812, when Napoleon was forced to retreat from Moscow, and reciting the history of USSR relations with Hitler. Of course, he painted the Soviet Union in an innocent light. However, “The Boss” did paint a dire picture of Soviet territorial losses in his opening statement, along with a couple of big lies.

The treacherous military attack by Hitler-Germany on our motherland, which was launched on June 22nd continues. Despite heroic resistance by the Red Army and although the best divisions of the enemy and his best air force units have already been destroyed and have met their end on the battlefields, the enemy continues to advance and throws new troops into battle. Hitler’s forces have succeeded in conquering Lithuania, a considerable part of Latvia, the western part of Byelorussia and part of western Ukraine. The Fascist air force expands the range of its bombers and subjects Murmansk, Orsha, Mogilyow, Smolensk, Kiev, Odessa and Sevastopol to bombardments. A serious danger hangs over our motherland...

Comrades! Our forces are boundless. The arrogant enemy will soon experience this...All our efforts in support of our heroic Red Army and our illustrious Red Navy! All efforts by the population for the destruction of the enemy! Forward, for our victory!

In the beginning days of the invasion, the security forces of the NKVD ran amok. Thousands of people were arrested, and many were shot for charges ranging from supposed sabotage to “defeatism.” After he was firmly back in power, Stalin had a number of generals shot.

After the Finnish war, Stalin changed the long-standing Red Army structure. Prior to the debacle in Finland, NKVD and other Communist Party officials stood side by side with military officers in command of formations all the way down to the company level. These men needed to be consulted for virtually every military decision to see if it was in line with “Stalinist thought” or the “party line,” which were one and the same, and to verify the army’s loyalty. It also nearly paralyzed decision-making. When Stalin recalled these political officers, who were mostly untrained, it was a popular decision in the Red Army. Now, Stalin reinstated the order, which made things at the front worse.

Throughout the country, Communist Party workers and propaganda departments went to work mobilizing and organizing the people. Tighter controls were imposed on factories, collective farms, and other institutions. Rallies were held, and volunteers for the army and local militias were organized. Large numbers of men were drafted, and for many, the time between their entry into the army and their death at the front was a matter of days. Training in some areas near the front amounted to days, sometimes hours, and sometimes never took place at all. Much of what the Soviets did was necessary, but over time, the intervention of political officers in military decision-making was counterproductive, and calls for the populace to act as communists rather than patriots were stopped. Stalin’s speech stated that the war with Hitler was not a war with the German people, who, Stalin said, were mostly workers and peasants held down by the Nazis and capitalists.

The calls for “communist solidarity” and “communist zeal” fell on deaf ears. Over a relatively short period of time, Stalin and the Soviet government began to call on the people to remember Russian victories of the past. Although the USSR was made up of many nationalities and ethnic groups, Russians and the closely related White Russians of Belarus were in

the majority, and historically, they were the most powerful and dominant. Russian victories against the German Teutonic Knights of the Middle Ages and many other Russian “glories” were emphasized, as can be seen in the poster below:



Illustration 5: The spirits of Russian heroes Alexander Nevsky, Marshal Mikhail Kutuzov, and a Red Army soldier of the Russian Revolution call upon the Red Army to defeat Hitler.

Chapter 6 – War of Extermination

World War II on the Eastern Front, as you can likely infer from the death totals we provided in the introduction, was extraordinarily brutal. Of course, war by its very nature is brutal, but like much in life, there is a continuum. An American WWII fighter pilot that this writer knew survived a mid-air collision over the Siegfried Line in western Germany in 1944. As he was parachuting to the ground, he noticed a large group of villagers gathering below. When he landed, it was clear to him that they would, at the very least, give him a good beating, although it would probably be something worse. Of all things, an SS officer came to his rescue. He was taken to a prisoner-of-war camp, and though being a prisoner was hard, he told me two things, “I’m glad I wasn’t in the Pacific and taken prisoner by the Japanese, and I’m glad I wasn’t one of the Russian guys I saw on the other side of the wire in the camp.”

Of course, the SS was known for its murderous brutality, but the war on the Western Front and in North Africa was lightyears different from the war in the Soviet Union or the Pacific. In those two places, racial/ethnic animus combined with ideology created a backdrop for the worst kind of atrocities. The first victim of Hitler’s attack eastward was Soviet-controlled eastern Poland. The Poles there were under no illusion as to what was in store for them, but when Hitler’s troops entered the Soviet Union itself, some Soviets welcomed the invaders. This was especially true in Ukraine, where Ukrainian nationalism was still strong. This was also where Stalin had created or at least exacerbated a famine that killed millions, never mind the Great Terror, which killed hundreds of thousands more.

Though there were Ukrainian collaborators throughout Hitler’s time in the region (many thousands worked in the concentration/extinction camps), the majority of people in Ukraine and elsewhere soon realized that Hitler’s reign was going to be even worse than Stalin’s.

In Stalin’s Soviet Union, former upper- and middle-class segments of the population had suffered greatly in the years following the Russian Revolution and collectivization. During the Great Terror, people who were even suspected of a crime were sent to the Gulag without trial, where millions died. But in the years before the war, the USSR, while far from being the paradise Soviet propaganda painted it to be, had settled into a somewhat peaceful routine. In the cities, people received an education and

free healthcare. Members of the working classes had the chance to climb the social ladder on a scale never before seen in Russian history. Women had greater rights than before, and in many cases, they were in positions of responsibility in manufacturing and, to a degree, government.

When Hitler invaded, that all changed. People were not judged on their loyalty, but on their race or, as the Nazis liked to say, “blood.” Obviously, they specifically targeted the Jewish populace, whose suffering knew no bounds, but the rest of the Soviet Union’s Slavic population was destined for starvation and mass killing, among other minority groups. If Hitler had been able to force the Soviet Union into surrender, the German plan for the western part of the USSR was to feed the population enough to keep them alive and wait for those who weren’t murdered to die. When this occurred, German “colonists” would move in and claim the land for the Reich.

Within a month or two, many USSR citizens knew what they were up against. Survivors from the front line areas poured into cities like Moscow and Leningrad with tales of German atrocities and destruction. In a way, the Germans were their worst enemy. If they had treated the population with at least a degree of respect and not mass terror, they might have won millions of converts to fight against Stalin. But obviously, that’s not what Nazism was about.

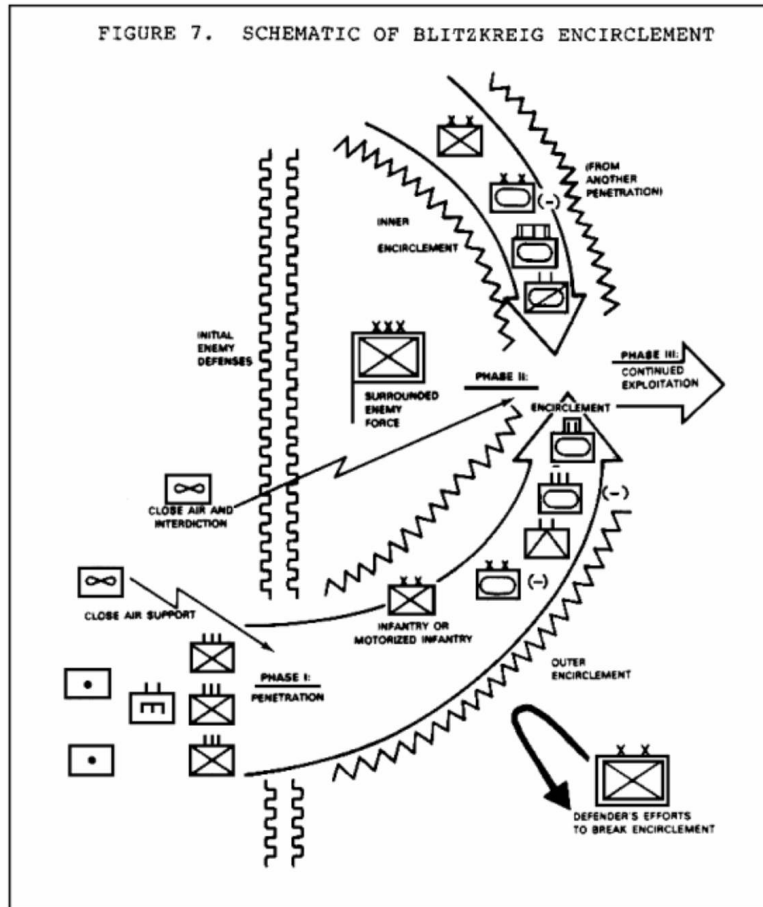


Illustration 6: Blitzkrieg involved the pinning down of enemy units with breakthroughs being exploited by large armored formations, which disrupted the enemy rear and supply lines, to cut off front line troops. This involved a high degree of training, leadership, and coordination.

When the German armed forces attacked, the Soviets knew what was coming, at least as far as the tactics they expected the enemy to use. They had seen it in Poland, Western Europe, and North Africa. However, knowing what an enemy is going to do is one thing; stopping it is another.

The Soviets' pre-war military doctrine called for large numbers of men and tanks to go on the offensive. Militarily, it was thought the Red Army's overwhelming superiority in men and tanks would wear the enemy down. Politically, the Soviet Union leaders, from Lenin and Trotsky to Stalin, believed that an offensive strategy would show the people the "dynamism" of communism. Soviet troops would also be welcomed by the working people of other countries as "liberators." Secretly, the leadership believed that preparing for a defensive war would be counterproductive and

encourage a restive population to rebel. In the latter half of the war (from summer 1943 to 1945), this was exactly what the Soviets did, but in 1941, a combination of factors made the effective execution of this plan impossible. First, no Soviet general was prepared to take any initiative. Blitzkrieg tactics rely on speed, so a large degree of autonomy had to be given to field commanders. However, after Stalin's purges, that was not going to happen.

Second, even though some units had received training in modern military tactics before the war, the vast majority had not. Zhukov had successfully carried out blitzkrieg-type tactics against the Japanese in Mongolia, but that was on a relatively small scale with trained troops. Zhukov was also given free rein to deal with the Japanese as long as he succeeded, which was not the case in the Nazi-Soviet war. Even troops with training in modern tactics (and this was especially true for armored and air units) did not have the technology needed to carry them out. Tank commanders might have had a radio in their vehicle, but none of the subordinate tanks did, which led to a collapse in communication. This was the same with aircraft, so coordinating tank and air attacks was next to impossible. Flags and hand signals could not be seen in battle, even if tank crews were foolish enough to stand on their turrets to do so, which many of them were.

Third, though Soviet commanders were not prepared to take any real initiative, in the first days and weeks of the war, they received orders to "ATTACK." It's hard to believe, but it almost didn't matter where, how, or with what other units. When orders came in to attack the Germans, that is what they did. It was better to take your chances on the battlefield than disobey orders and be shot in the back by the NKVD.

Fourth, the vast majority of Soviet troops at the beginning of the war had little training whatsoever. Because of the Germans' rapid movements, huge numbers of Soviet troops were killed or captured, along with their equipment. The situation was so dire that new draftees were given a uniform (many times without boots—those lucky enough had shoes from home) and told to pick up the weapon of a man who had fallen near them. This is not an exaggeration.

The western Soviet Union has two notable geographic features: vast forests (some the size of US states) and plains extending to the horizon and beyond for hundreds of miles. At the time, many of those forests were truly impenetrable, especially to military vehicles. It was also difficult to

coordinate and move large infantry units within them. Most of these forests were bypassed by the Germans to be swept for stragglers later

On the plains, the blitzkrieg played out as it had in other areas of Europe. German infantry attacks, which were supported by artillery, would attack Russian formations and hold them in place. Weak points in the line would be scouted, and armor and air attacks would engage in close coordination and in great strength, driving deep behind the main enemy line and then meeting together to surround the enemy. When the Soviets went on the offensive, it moved the Red Army troops out of defensive positions, which played into German hands.

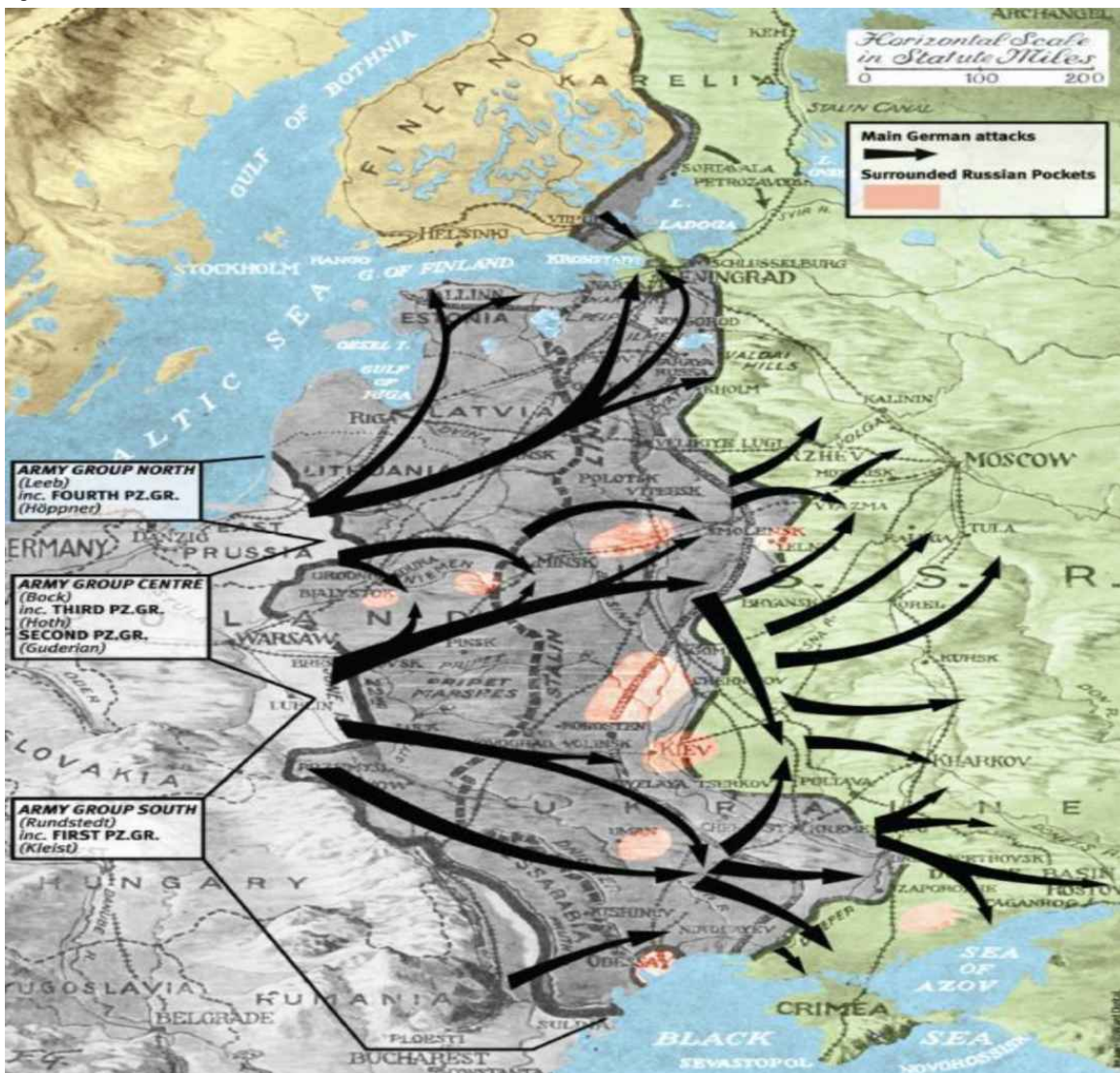


Illustration 7: Operation Barbarossa saw blitzkrieg tactics performed on a massive scale. The pink areas are where hundreds of thousands of Soviet troops were surrounded.

As you can see from the map above, the Soviets were outmaneuvered on a vast scale. German troops and the Nazi leadership all the way up to the Führer believed that it was only a matter of time before the Soviets collapsed completely or begged for terms of surrender.

Heading east, German soldiers and their allies would sometimes wake up in the morning and begin marching in an attempt to catch up with their motorized comrades, walking from sunup to sunset. At times, they would pass hundreds of thousands of Red Army troops heading westward to prisoner-of-war camps.



Illustration 8: Soviet troops marching to an uncertain fate as German prisoners (courtesy US Holocaust Memorial Museum).

Red Army soldiers who were taken prisoner were between a rock and a hard place. More than five million Soviet soldiers died of starvation, disease, or overwork in German concentration camps. Many were shot outright. The first victims of Zyklon-B gas, also known as hydrogen cyanide, were Red Army soldiers at Auschwitz who were used as guinea pigs.

Soviet soldiers who managed to escape were often sent to the Gulag as traitors for being captured in the first place or as suspected Nazi spies. On

many occasions, the families of prisoners of war fell under suspicion and/or lost their jobs. At the end of the war, those who had survived German captivity and returned to the USSR were sent directly to the Gulag as traitors or for “re-education.” Many did not survive. The war on the Eastern Front was terrible in more ways than most can imagine.

Of course, German soldiers falling into Soviet hands suffered a similar fate. Just as many were shot as were taken prisoner. Those who survived their initial capture were usually sent to the Gulag, where most died. At the beginning of 1943, when the Battle of Stalingrad ended in a Soviet victory, 91,000 German and allied soldiers were taken prisoner. Only 5,000 returned home.

Though the Soviets fought hard in places (as the Germans moved farther into the USSR, the Soviet resistance did stiffen considerably), the Nazis took chunks of the country at a time. Areas many times the size of the 1938 German Reich fell into Hitler’s hands. While the fighting on the front was moving eastward with great rapidity, the Soviets found themselves in another struggle. They needed to save the country’s industries, the vast majority of which were in the western part of the nation, and to evacuate as many people from the front line areas (or soon to be front line areas) as they could.

As far as the population was concerned, officials were under Stalin’s double-edged sword. If they began evacuating people and factories too soon, they were at risk of being labeled “defeatist” and would possibly suffer serious penalties, including being shot. If they didn’t evacuate people and machinery in time, they might be accused of incompetence or, worse, working for the Germans.

After the first few weeks, the situation calmed a bit, as those at the top realized the Germans were moving much faster than anyone had imagined they could. In many cases, the people did not wait to be told to leave by local Communist Party officials; they simply fled in panic as the Nazis approached. However, in many cases, especially away from the main German thrusts (as you can see in Illustration 7 above), huge areas of the country were initially bypassed by the Germans in their attempt to drive deep into the USSR and envelop large Soviet formations. Many towns, villages, and smaller cities were cut off, and they became refuges for fleeing citizens since they were quiet and cut off from communication, at least for the moment. When the front line German troops passed by, reinforcements

and occupation troops moved in. Whenever the Nazis arrived, a harsh regime began. Immediately, the Germans moved to arrest any local or regional leaders they could find. Anyone found to be a member of the Communist Party was taken, and in most cases, they were executed. In some places, particularly the Baltic states (which had been free since 1919 until Stalin annexed them in 1940), massive crowds turned on any remaining Soviets and local communists, often beating them to death.

Unfortunately, anti-Semitism reared its ugly head in the Baltics, as well as in other areas occupied by the Germans. When the Soviets moved into Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania (especially the latter), many Jews turned to them as relative saviors, heeding their words of a “universal brotherhood of the working classes and equality.” Jews in these areas had lived with persecution of various degrees for centuries, and many (but not all) had gravitated toward socialism and communism as a hope for a better future. In some places, Jewish communists were put in positions of power under Stalin’s regime. When the Nazis moved in, latent anti-Semitism exploded into the open, which was encouraged by the Germans. Of course, the Germans, in the form of the SS *Einsatzgruppen* (“Special Action Groups”), did most of the killing. Due to the local anti-Semites and the SS, the Baltics were the first nations the SS called *Judenfrei* (“free of Jews”). In other parts of the Soviet Union, especially in western Ukraine, similar things occurred.

In the parts of the USSR that found themselves under German control, the planned exploitation of the populace began, beginning with the food supply, much of which began to flow back to Germany. In some places, the Germans found intact factories, mines, railroads, and other infrastructure. In these cases, the Soviets didn’t have time to evacuate or destroy anything while they retreated. In many other towns and cities, infrastructure was destroyed by battles or by shelling and aerial bombings.

However, especially as they marched deeper into the Soviet Union, the Germans found that many of the factories had simply been taken down and removed. Though historians are finding that the number of evacuated Soviet factories and industries was less than originally believed, the Soviet removal and reestablishment of industries farther to the west, which was out of range for German troops and bombers, can be called a modern miracle. Without those industries, it’s highly probable the Soviets would have lost the war.

The Soviets moved 2,593 plants out of harm's way. A good chunk, around 1,523 of them, were large plants. Of these major tank, airplane, weapon, and munitions plants, 226 were moved to the Volga region, 667 to the Ural Mountains, 244 to western Siberia, 78 to eastern Siberia, and 308 to Kazakhstan and the other Central Asian Soviet republics. Some of the plants that had been moved to the Volga region were relocated to the Stalingrad area, where many continued production as the battle raged around them. During the German 1942 summer offensive in the southern Soviet Union, more industries had to be moved, including a number that had been evacuated earlier.

As one might expect, this did not go off without a hitch. Sometimes, the workers of these plants ended up hundreds of miles from their equipment. Sometimes equipment was dumped in the middle of nowhere to fulfill quotas and speed requirements only to be found later. In some cases, this was what was instructed, and a considerable number of factories restarted production in the open air, powered by diesel generators.

Some factories got up and running very quickly. Parts of the Leningrad Kirov tank factory were evacuated in early August and were producing tanks again by September 1st in another part of the country. Of about 1,500 plants evacuated during the second half of 1941, about 1,200 were in operation again in 1942.

Soviet production was staggering even though its most productive and populated areas fell to the Germans. Despite that, Stalin constantly demanded more aid from the Western Allies. This aid had begun on a very small scale before the United States became involved in the war, but with the entry of the world's greatest industrial power, the aid to the USSR increased year by year and also included agricultural products.

Though the United States and Great Britain sent weapons to the Soviets, including tanks and fighter planes, the Russians became relatively self-sufficient in those sectors by late 1942. The tanks (which included the US pre-war main battle tank, the M3 Lee, and the later M4 Sherman, which were both inferior to Soviet tanks) and planes (mainly reconnaissance planes and relatively obsolete P-39 Airacobras) were not needed as much as small arms and anti-aircraft guns, transportation, and raw materials, especially rubber. Hundreds of thousands of American trucks and jeeps helped the Soviets greatly in the war effort.

These supplies came over the Iranian border in the south (that country was jointly occupied by the Soviets and the British in 1941 to ensure the supply route), into Central Asia via India, and, most famously, via the Murmansk convoys in the Arctic Circle. These merchant convoys sailed through not only some of the most atrocious weather on Earth but also through heavy concentrations of German U-boats, which sometimes took such a toll on the merchantmen that the convoys had to be halted on occasion.



Illustration 9: The conditions facing the naval and merchant ships of the Murmansk convoys were brutal for much of the year.

As far as the population, evacuations were sometimes well organized and timely, but they often were not. Two of the more tragic examples were at Leningrad in the late summer of 1941 and at Stalingrad in 1942. In both cases, hundreds of thousands of civilians were evacuated, but both cities housed millions of people. During the two-and-a-half-year siege of Leningrad, one million civilians died. At Stalingrad, the number was in the hundreds of thousands. This happened throughout the country on a smaller scale.

It is amazing that despite the loss of most of its most productive and resource-rich areas and the deaths or capture of millions of people, Soviet production increased year by year with the exception of 1945, the war's last year. Below you will see a table for the main categories of Soviet defense production.

| | | | | | | | |
|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| | | | | | | | |
|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|

| | 1940 | 1941 | 1942 | 1943 | 1944 | 1945 |
|---|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|---------|
| Aircraft | 10,565 | 15,735 | 25,436 | 34,845 | 40,246 | 20,102 |
| Tanks/self-propelled guns | 2,794 | 6,590 | 24,446 | 24,089 | 28,963 | 15,419 |
| Artillery/mortars (thousands) | 53.8 | 67.8 | 356.9 | 199.5 | 129.5 | 64.6 |
| Rifles/carbines (millions, except 1945) | 1.46 | 2.66 | 4.05 | 3.44 | 2.45 | 574,000 |

Chapter 7 – The Major Battles

The war on the Eastern Front involved millions of men on both sides from many nationalities, including Russian, German, Finnish, Hungarian, Romanian, Italian, and Spanish, not to mention the many ethnic groups that made up the Soviet Union. Tens of thousands of battles raged from 1941 to 1945, most of them only remembered by historians who specialized in the subject and the veterans of the battles themselves.

However, a number of battles fought on the Eastern Front were monumental and earth-shattering: the opening invasion of Operation Barbarossa, which the Germans executed with amazing speed, Leningrad, Moscow, Stalingrad, Kursk, Operation Bagration, and Berlin.

Barbarossa

Within the opening months of the war, a series of huge battles took place, most of them resulting in tremendous Soviet defeats and losses in manpower. As you read in a prior chapter, the Germans used their blitzkrieg tactics to great effect all along the front, piercing the Soviet front lines and driving deep behind masses of Soviet troops before they could react, cutting them off from reinforcements and supplies.

The Germans surrounded and eliminated hundreds of thousands of Red Army troops at places such as Bialystok, Poland, near Minsk in Byelorussia (present-day Belarus), near Uman and Kiev (often spelled as Kyiv today) in Ukraine, and at Bryansk, Smolensk, and Vyazma on their drive toward Moscow. That is not to say the fighting was easy. The Germans sustained tremendous casualties themselves, and they were less able to sustain them than the Red Army was.

During Operation Barbarossa, which began on June 22nd, 1941, the German death toll approached 200,000 in December 1941, with another 40,000 missing in action and nearly 700,000 wounded. Large numbers of tanks and aircraft were destroyed, nearly 3,000 each. Their allies sustained 150,000 killed, wounded, or missing.

Large as these numbers were, they were dwarfed by the losses inflicted on the Red Army. Almost 600,000 Soviet soldiers were killed, nearly 300,000 died from disease, hunger, cold, or execution (the Soviets executed soldiers for desertion, and the Germans were also responsible for atrocities committed against the Soviets on or near the battlefield). Nearly one and a

half million men were wounded, and three million Soviet soldiers were captured (about one-quarter of these were reservists who were captured before they could enter battle). Soviet losses in tanks and aircraft were astounding: over 20,000 each. A majority of the Soviet airplanes were destroyed on the ground in the opening days of the war.

If the Soviets outnumbered the Germans so greatly in men and materiel, how and why did the Germans win battle after battle in the war's opening months? Some of the reasons have already been discussed: Stalin's depression and orders to simply attack, which played right into German hands; lack of initiative on the Soviets' part combined with lack of experience in both command and in the field; and highly experienced German officers and troops with exceedingly high morale and a proven, well-tested battlefield theory that was executed almost flawlessly.

Still, beginning around late August/early September 1941, from Hitler down to the lowest German soldier in the field, the Nazis began to scratch their heads and ask themselves a series of questions: "How can the Reds keep fighting?" "Where are all these men coming from?" "Why did no one know that most of the Soviet tanks were better than ours?" As the Germans got closer to the capital of Moscow and the USSR's "second city," Leningrad, they also saw a stiffening of Soviet resolve. Though large numbers of Soviet troops were still surrendering, those numbers were growing smaller, as the Soviet soldiers were fighting harder and more skillfully.

Also taking a toll on German morale were the vast expanses of the USSR. Germany is a small country, about the size of the US states of Washington and Oregon combined. Many Germans at that time had never been outside of their home state or region, and now, they were confronted with mile after mile of unlimited plains with virtually no landmarks.

In the summer, Germany was hot and dusty. Starting in late September/early October, it began to rain. Russia has two rainy seasons: fall and spring. In each case, especially in the war years and before paved roads became common in the country, the rain turned everything into swampy mud. Russians have a name for the rainy season: *Rasputitsa*, meaning "The Sea of Mud" or "The Time of Mud." It bogged down tanks and horses, which powered the German army to a larger degree than motor transport, slowing the German advance on Moscow.



Bundesarchiv Bild 146-1031-146-204
Foto: G. Ang. | November 1941

Illustration 10: German troops pulling a command car through the Russian mud. The Nazi flag is on the hood of the car to identify it to German planes to avoid friendly fire (courtesy Bundesarchiv).

By the end of October, the Germans were worn out by the mud and rain, the increasingly fierce Soviet resistance, and logistical problems, which included the breakdown of many of their tanks and vehicles and the lack of replacement parts. Even Hitler realized the likelihood of his men taking Moscow in 1941 was slim to none, but he determined to drive on before the winter set in.

However, knowing what the Russian winter is like from reading about it in a book or an intelligence report is far different from experiencing it. The more cognizant German officers and men knew they were ill-prepared for the coming cold weather, but it wasn't until after it had set in that Hitler and the Nazis realized how ill-equipped their troops were. At that point, desperation took root, and Germany set up a nationwide drive to encourage German men and women to donate winter clothing. It was not an unusual sight to see battle-hardened German troops wearing women's fur stoles and minks on the front lines. However, most of what was collected arrived too late to help the troops in front of Moscow.



Illustration 11: Aside from the white-washed helmets, these German troops, like most, were ill-prepared for the Russian winter. Note the clothing, which was better suited to fall than -20°F temperatures.



Illustration 12: By contrast, many Soviet troops were better prepared for the weather, especially those brought west from Siberia.

The responsibility for the defense of Moscow was given to General (later Marshal) Georgy Zhukov, with General Ivan Konev, another future Hero of the Soviet Union, as his second-in-command. Zhukov had been responsible for the Soviet victory over the Japanese at Khalkhin Gol and had organized the defense of Leningrad in the fall, preventing the Germans from taking that important city.

Stalin and the Soviet leadership had debated on whether to leave Moscow in October. In the end, it was decided that if they left, Soviet morale might take a fatal hit. So, they elected to stay, coordinating hundreds of thousands of citizens in preparing defenses around the city.

On November 7th, Stalin ordered a military parade to be held in Red Square. To this day, the November 7th parade is remembered for showing the world that the Soviets meant to fight it out. The troops that took part in the parade marched directly to the front.

Despite the difficulties, the Germans attempted one final push on Moscow before the weather made it impossible. On November 15th, they began an offensive to the south of the city, with the aim of driving behind the capital and cutting it off from the rest of the country. They made progress despite the weather and repeated Soviet counterattacks, which were urged by Stalin but frowned on by Zhukov, as they were wasteful in the extreme. At one point, some German troops reported seeing the spires of St. Basil's Cathedral in the Kremlin off in the distance. It was as far as they ever got.

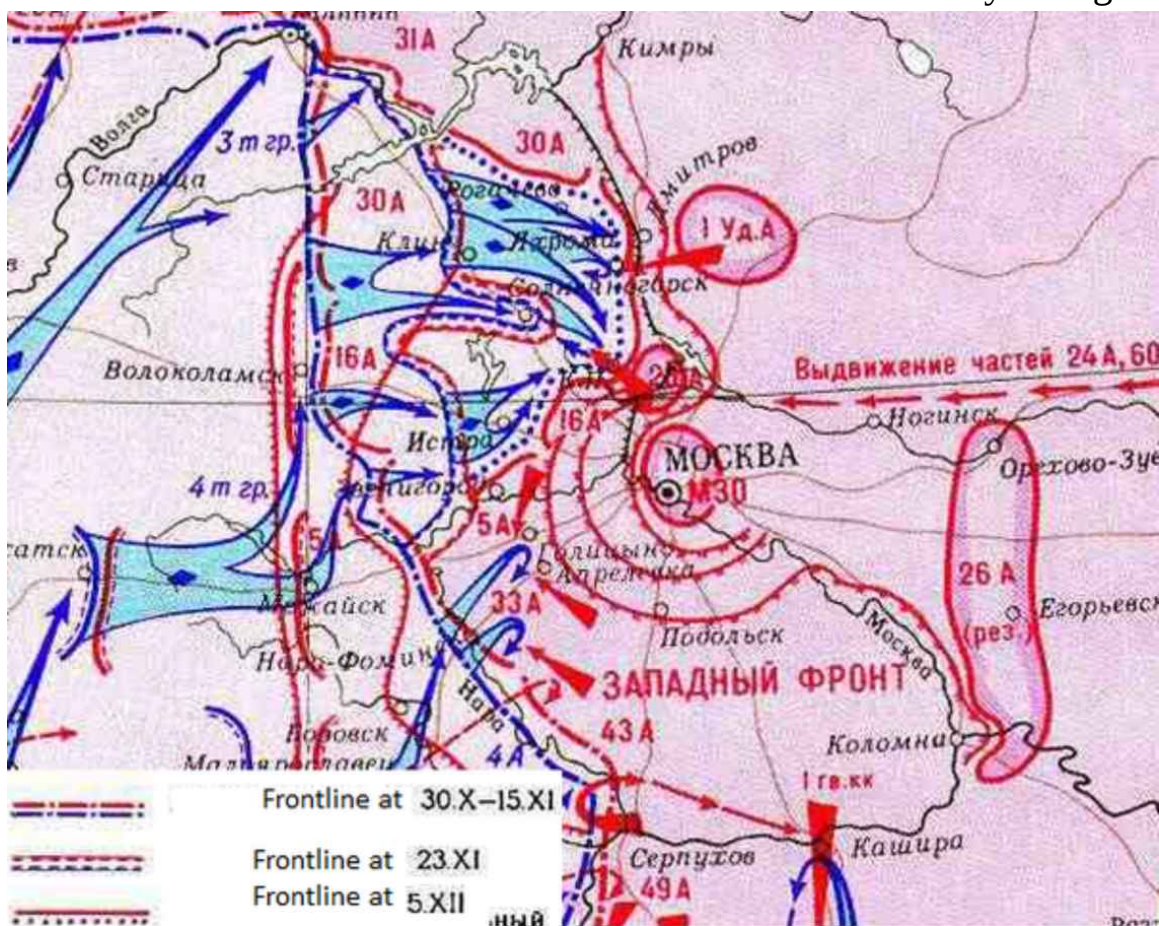


Illustration 13: A map seldom conveys the intensity of a battle, but this one comes close. Above is a Soviet map showing the repeated German drives on Moscow and the rings of Soviet defenses along with Red Army counterattacks up to December 5th, 1941.

In the spring of 1941, Soviet spy Richard Sorge, who was working in Tokyo undercover as a journalist, had warned Stalin of the upcoming German invasion. Stalin did not believe him. In late 1941, information from Sorge and others in Japan reported that Japanese war plans did not include an attack on the USSR. This time, Stalin trusted the information, and he ordered most of his Far Eastern troops westward. Eighteen Soviet divisions, many of them well trained, experienced, and well equipped for winter, moved rapidly westward. Among these eighteen divisions were a number of armored divisions, which totaled 1,700 tanks. One and a half thousand planes also made the trek from one side of the nation to the other.

Hitler's generals and intelligence departments reported that his troops near Moscow were worn out, having been stopped by logistics, weather, and the Soviets. This was true, but they also told the Führer that the Soviets were in the same state. Accordingly, Hitler was more concerned with his plans for the spring and other fronts when the Red Army gave him a truly unwelcome surprise in the first week of December.

On December 4th, the Soviet 4th Shock Army (the Soviet "Shock" armies were often put in the vanguard of Soviet offensives and given significantly more tanks and artillery than other Soviet armies) and the 20th Army attacked the Germans north of the capital. On December 6th, the 10th Soviet Army attacked south of the city. Behind them were hundreds of thousands of Red Army soldiers.

In total, the Soviet counterattack included over one million men, and though this completely surprised the Germans, the Germans had a similar number of troops in the area. However, offensive forces choose the point of attack and the forces that are sent there, and in this case, the Soviets overwhelmed many German defenses with sheer numbers. Additionally, they were well rested and better equipped for winter, and for the first time, they had truly sizable quantities of the new T-34 tank at their disposal,

The T-34 is often called the "best all-around tank of WWII." While some German tanks later in the war, such as the Panther and Tiger, were qualitatively better in many respects, they also had serious flaws that the T-

34 did not. For instance, the Panthers and Tigers were overengineered and took too long to produce, and spare parts were intricate and difficult to manufacture. Both German tanks, especially at first, were subject to mechanical breakdown. By contrast, the T-34 was easy and quick to build, reliable, easy to operate, and powerful enough to challenge most German tanks, especially with the numbers on their side.

The Germans were driven back between 90 to 250 miles in different places before reinforcements arrived from other fronts, allowing their defenses to stiffen. The Soviet Moscow offensive, while not a strategic turning point like Stalingrad would be the next year, showed the Germans, the Western Allies, and the Soviet people that the Red Army had the capacity to defeat the Nazis on the battlefield, something they had not been able to do effectively until then.

Making things even worse for the Germans, Hitler decided to honor his alliance with Japan, and he declared war on the United States of America on December 11th, just days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

Leningrad

Leningrad (today's St. Petersburg) was the USSR's "second city" and had been the capital of the Russian Empire from 1732 to 1918, after which Moscow was named as the capital again. Leningrad was the home of the Bolshevik Revolution and was known as the center of culture and fine arts in Russia. It is one of the most beautiful cities in the world, and it is often called the "Venice of the North" for its many canals. Hitler had a special hatred for Leningrad for all of these reasons, and he decided not only would the city be one of the prime targets for his invasion, but it would also be wiped off the face of the earth and the land given to his allies, the Finns.

German Army Group North was responsible for the attack on Leningrad, and it had been making its way steadily toward the city since the invasion of the USSR began, driving through northern Poland and the Baltic nations to do so. To Hitler's dismay, the Finns refused to join the attack on the city, which might have cost Hitler his victory there. The Finns had told Hitler they would only make war on the Soviets to get back the land that had been taken from them by Stalin in the Winter War of 1939/40. Since Finland had never included Leningrad, they refused to help, staying true to their word.

By September 15th, the Germans had cut the city off from the rest of the country. German shells had already begun falling on the city on September

4th. Leningrad was a city of nearly three million people when the war began, and the prior German attacks had driven refugees from the surrounding country into the city, making a bad situation worse. Four hundred thousand civilians were evacuated from the area before the Germans arrived, but that still left millions trapped.

The Germans began bombing the city shortly after Operation Barbarossa began, but in mid-September, they began sending hundreds of bombers at a time. On the 23rd, hundreds of German bombers destroyed most of the city's food warehouses, as well as seriously damaging hospitals and other vital institutions. This would only add to the tragedy to come.

Though the Soviets began to construct anti-tank and anti-aircraft defenses around the city in the late summer, they had neglected to store enough food. Making matters worse was the reluctance of Soviet officials to report bad news to Stalin. As a result, the Soviet High Command was unaware of the shortfall in food, a problem that was only compounded by the destruction of the food warehouses. When the Germans surrounded the city, Leningrad only had enough food supplies to last for a few weeks. Fuel supplies were also limited, and the main electrical plants were not only damaged by the German bombings but also needed oil for their generators.

Leningrad needed some 600 tons of food a day, and barely any food got into the city after the Germans surrounded it. The only route open to the Soviets was across Lake Ladoga on the northern side of the Karelian Isthmus. When the siege of the city began, only a small number of boats were available. These had to brave intense German air attacks. The only hope for the city was the lake freezing over, which would allow the Red Army to bring supplies across the ice. This eventually happened, but not before hundreds of thousands of people starved to death. In actuality, the death toll in Leningrad was over a million. The siege is often called "the 900 Days," although it stopped just short of that.

The first winter of the siege was the worst, but people continued dying until the German ring was broken in late January 1944. The food ration dropped as low as 125 grams of bread a day for an adult. Workers and soldiers got a little more, but it was still not enough. Within weeks, all of the dogs and cats in Leningrad were killed and eaten. Tree bark and leather were boiled to make "soup." Sawdust and other virtually inedible ingredients were added to the "bread" to stretch the supply. Anything wooden was burned for heat; at times, the temperature fell as low as -40°F for extended periods.

Worst of all, as the winter of 1941 wore on, cannibalism was reported. This was denied for years by the Soviet authorities, but it was proven conclusively by American writer and Russian expert Harrison Salisbury in the early 1970s. When the USSR fell in 1991, records that were finally opened to the public bore out many instances of cannibalism in Leningrad. Most of the incidents involved people devouring those who were already dead, but there was also a larger-than-imagined number of instances of people being killed at night and later sold on the black market as “pork” or “meat pies.” People caught eating a corpse were given lengthy prison sentences. Those convicted of killing people for food were shot on the spot—nearly one hundred people were killed for this crime during the siege.

When Lake Ladoga froze, the Soviets slowly began to bring trucks loaded with supplies over the ice. In that first winter, not nearly enough supplies were brought over, but by the late spring, when the ice started to melt, the amount of food, fuel, and other necessities increased. A number of trucks actually fell through the ice, sometimes taking their crews with them. Despite this, by winter of 1944, the “Ice Road” or “Road of Hope” was bringing in just enough to sustain the city’s population. The operation itself was an incredible feat of engineering and determination. A railroad was even built across the ice. Warming stations, hospitals, barracks, anti-aircraft defenses, and more were also constructed on Lake Ladoga, whose ice could be six feet thick in winter.

The military aspects of the siege were rather mundane in the grand scope of the Eastern Front. For two and a half years, the Germans shelled and bombed the city, trying to destroy morale and the city’s infrastructure. Before the war, Leningrad produced about 10 percent of the manufactured goods of the USSR. During the war, the factories continued to produce with supplies brought in from the outside, sometimes doing so in buildings without heat or even roofs. Tanks that had been built in the city rolled out onto the battlefield without paint; this was how badly they were needed.

In early 1944, the Germans were being pushed back all along the front by the Red Army, but they tenaciously hung onto their grip around Leningrad until the Soviet Operation Iskra (“Spark”) broke the siege.

Stalingrad

The Germans were still immensely strong after their unsuccessful attempt to take Moscow. They held large areas of the western Soviet Union and

most of Europe, but they were not the power they had been in June 1941. Hitler had gambled everything on destroying the USSR in just a few weeks or months, and instead of getting weaker, it seemed the Soviets were getting stronger. Assisting the Soviets in this situation was Great Britain and the United States, particularly in the area of raw materials, anti-aircraft guns, medium- and large-caliber machine guns, trucks, and jeeps.

Despite this help, the Soviets were still falling behind. They had sustained great losses in men, materiel, and resources. Their soldiers were still largely lacking the training necessary to defeat the Germans decisively in open battles. However, the Soviet generals were beginning to understand their own mistakes. Those who did not learn ended up dead on the battlefield or, in the case of many higher-ranking officers, in front of a firing squad. Some were sent to areas far from the front when they showed talent in other areas, such as training or logistics. Stalin was a hard-taskmaster, but this was a war for the survival of not only the USSR but also of the people who inhabited it.

1942 turned out to be the crucial year. This was the year that the war slowly turned around for the Soviets, as well as the Western Allies, with an emphasis on “slowly.”

In the late winter of 1942, Hitler and his generals began planning their spring offensive. Some of Hitler’s generals encouraged him to call a halt to the offensive operations in the Soviet Union and instead build strong defenses, pulling back to better positions to do so if necessary. Of course, even those with limited knowledge of the war and the Führer know this did not happen. Hitler, along with a sizable group of supporters both in the Nazi Party and in the military, believed that victory was still in sight, despite the setbacks near Moscow.

What was clear to even Hitler was that his armies in Russia were nowhere near as strong as they had been, and without considerably weakening his forces elsewhere in Europe, they were likely to stay that way. The number of eligible German men were dwindling to the point where they could not be replaced. As time went on, the age limits for the German military were both decreased and increased, which raised numbers but hardly effectiveness.

Still, the German forces in the USSR were still powerful, and Hitler determined that 1942 would be the year of final victory. Most of his

generals and enemies expected that Hitler would order a huge push on Moscow when the weather improved, but Moscow was no longer as important to the Germans as it had been.

Two things were of more importance to Hitler in his planning for 1942: 1) seizing the Soviet oil fields in the Caucasus, along with other resource-rich areas in southern Russia and Ukraine, and 2) cutting off those supplies and resources to the Soviets. To do that, Hitler and his commanders developed *Fall Blau* (“Case Blue”).

Case Blue had two components. The first was for the Germans to push southward into the Caucasus, pressing on to capture its rich oil fields, which culminated in the fields at Baku on the peninsula’s far southeastern side. The second was to move directly east to the city of Stalingrad on the Volga River, Europe’s longest river. Stalingrad was a major industrial center, producing over 10 percent of the USSR’s heavy machinery and steel products. In wartime, that meant tanks, along with other weapons. Taking Stalingrad would also cut off the supplies moving northward on the Volga River. Successfully accomplishing either would deal a serious blow to the Soviets, and taking both might end the war.

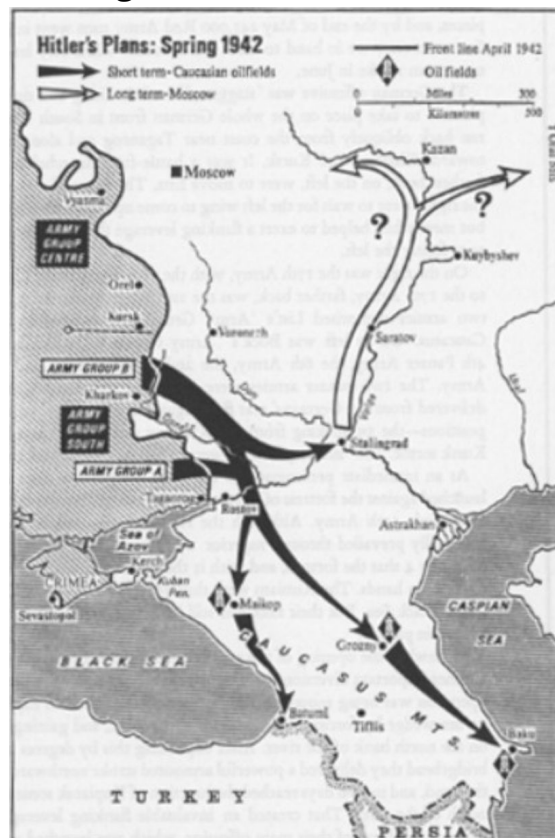


Illustration 11: The tentative German plans for the spring of 1942, including a possible drive behind Moscow if the first stage was successful.

To accomplish this, German Army Group South was divided into two commands: Army Group A and Army Group B.

Army Group A was tasked with taking the Caucasus, and it was the “weaker” of the two groups. It was commanded by Field Marshal Wilhelm List and included the German 1st Panzer Army, 11th Army, 17th Army, and the Romanian 3rd Army.

Army Group B was commanded by General Friedrich Paulus and included the German 4th Panzer Army, 2nd Army, and 6th Army (Hitler’s largest). Attached to Army Group B were the Italian 8th Army, Romanian 4th Army, and the Hungarian 2nd Army. Army Group B was stronger than its counterpart, but it did have a fatal weakness. The Italian, Hungarian, and Romanian armies were poorly equipped and poorly motivated. When the time came, this proved to be crucial.

The German forces amounted to approximately 1.5 million men, nearly 2,000 armored vehicles, and about 2,000 aircraft of various kinds. Soviet forces in the area eventually came to approximately 1.7 million men, between 3,000 and 3,800 tanks, 1,500 to 2,000 aircraft, including combat and non-combat planes, and over 16,000 guns. Another estimated one million were either being trained and in reserve.

Like they had been in June 1941, Stalin and the Stavka were fooled in the spring of 1942. They believed the main German push would be toward Moscow, so they planned accordingly. Many of the forces listed above were initially deployed near the capital and had to be rushed south. The Germans actually conducted a massive deception operation in order to fool the Soviets into thinking Moscow was the target, which included false radio messages, fake troop movements, and “secret plans” that happened to fall into Red Army hands.

Case Blue began in late June after being thrown off its timetable by a poorly planned Soviet offensive that was designed to focus the Germans away from Moscow. The German 6th Army defeated this attack with relative ease and began their own push eastward after resupplying.

The Germans began in stages between June 24th and 28th. As had happened the prior summer, they drove the Soviets back, catching them relatively unaware. Though large numbers of Soviet soldiers were taken prisoner, the

Red Army generally retreated in good order, with fewer men surrendering or being cut off than in 1941. Both branches of the German attack moved with great speed in the initial stages of the attack.

The terrain of the Caucasus is very different than the area near Stalingrad. It's more rugged, was less developed at the time, and the very difficult and high Caucasus Mountains divide the region in half. This meant the Soviets could deploy fewer men to the area, as they could count on the terrain and strong defenses near the oil fields to stall or halt the Germans.

Toward the end of August, it became clear to both sides that the battle for Stalingrad was going to be at the center of the German and Soviet war efforts for the foreseeable future. Large battles were fought in the miles leading to the city, especially when the Germans attempted to cross the wide Don River. The Don was the last serious natural obstacle on the way to Stalingrad.

In July, after the Germans cut the main railroad linking Stalingrad and the Caucasus, Stalin took matters into his own hands. He personally wrote the famous Order No. 227, more frequently known as the "Not One Step Back" order. In his own rough language, Stalin decreed that those retreating without orders would be shot or sent to penal battalions and given the roughest assignments, like defusing mines under German fire. Officers who issued retreat orders without authorization would be shot. Behind Soviet front line units, NKVD "blocking units" would be stationed, with orders to kill any men they caught fleeing the battlefield. The order was never disseminated in print. Instead, it was broadcast over the radio and loudspeakers repeatedly for the Red Army to hear. Some say Order No. 227 helped the Soviet defense stiffen. Others, including veterans, said by late 1942, most Soviet soldiers realized exactly how dangerous the situation was and how brutal the Germans were—in other words, they didn't need Stalin to tell them. Regardless, both points of view show how desperate the situation had become.

By the end of September, the German drive in the Caucasus had begun to slow down. It was hampered by the Red Army, the terrain, and the immense distance supplies had to travel to reach them. The oil fields the Germans captured were thoroughly destroyed by the retreating Soviets, and they would likely remain useless for a year or more even if the Germans had succeeded in driving the Soviets back from Stalingrad.

Accordingly, German troops were shifted north to aid in the capture of Stalingrad. For reasons of personal pride and national honor, both sides were determined to take or defend the city named after the Soviet dictator.

On August 23rd, 1942, the *Luftwaffe* (the Nazi air force) launched a massive attack on Stalingrad. Thousands of civilians were killed, and much of the city's center and residential areas were flattened. The key factory areas in the north and south of the city were damaged, but they continued to produce items while the battle raged around them in September.

German troops miles away watched the smoke rise some three miles over the plains and city. Reports from pilots made it seem like Stalingrad had been destroyed, and many Germans believed the city would fall to them rather easily. They could not have been more wrong. For one, the bombing of the city had actually benefited the defenders. The massive amounts of rubble created choke points and "natural" defenses. It wouldn't take long for the Russians to create tunnels and trenches under and through the city, enabling them to spring upon the Germans from behind without being observed.

As the Germans moved into the city, a new Soviet commander took over the Soviet 62nd Army: General (later Marshal) Vasily Chuikov. Chuikov had joined the Red Army as a teenager during the Russian Civil War and had been wounded a number of times. He was also one of the few successful Soviet commanders in Finland and had commanded troops in the Soviet invasion of Poland.

By early November, the Germans were in possession of about 90 percent of the city, but the fighting was beyond tough—it was brutal. One reason is that both sides began to get the feeling that this battle might decide the outcome of the war in Russia and fought accordingly. Another is that Chuikov and his junior officers ordered their men to "hug the enemy." This was done in response to the initial German superiority in tanks, guns, and planes. By getting close to the enemy, the Soviets hoped to mitigate these German strengths, hoping that the Nazis would not be able to bomb them without hitting their own men. In many cases, this worked beautifully.

Still, by late November, the Soviets were reduced to holding a small area on the Volga River's western bank, which allowed men and supplies to come into the city. This was a very risky Soviet strategy. By early November, they realized two main things: 1) the Germans were tired, sick, and

malnourished, and 2) the Nazis kept pouring reinforcements into the city but were neglecting their flanks. The bulk of Axis troops to the north and south of the city were Hungarian, Italian, and Romanian, all of whom were substantially weaker than their German comrades. So, as the Germans kept sending more men into the city to hopefully take it before the bad weather set in (which they were still underprepared for, despite their experience of the prior year), the Soviets pulled back, placing enough men into the foothold on the Volga to hold it.

That isn't to say they "let" the Germans have the city. Fierce and brutal fighting took place in and below the city in the sewers. Snipers hunted officers, radiomen, and each other. Germans and Russians sometimes held parts of the same building, fighting from floor to floor with grenades, knives, shovels, makeshift clubs, pistols, and their bare hands. When the fight for Stalingrad ended, more than one million men (both Axis and Soviet) had been killed or had died from frostbite, sickness, or starvation.

By the beginning of October, the Soviets began the plan for a counterattack. To do this, they would not waste men trying to dislodge the Germans from the city. No, they would attack the weaker flanks, drive deep behind German lines from the north and south of the city, and envelop not only the forces in Stalingrad but also those behind it. Realizing the Germans had placed virtually all their hopes on a victory, the Red Army was able to remove sizable numbers of men from other areas of the front. They did this very secretly, employing some of the same tactics the Germans had before the battle. As the Soviet troops neared the city, they were ordered to move only by night. Security was very, very tight.

On November 19th, the Soviets launched Operation Uranus, which was a massive offensive to the north of the city. On the following day, while the Germans were busy trying to figure out the situation in the north, the Red Army launched its attack in the south.

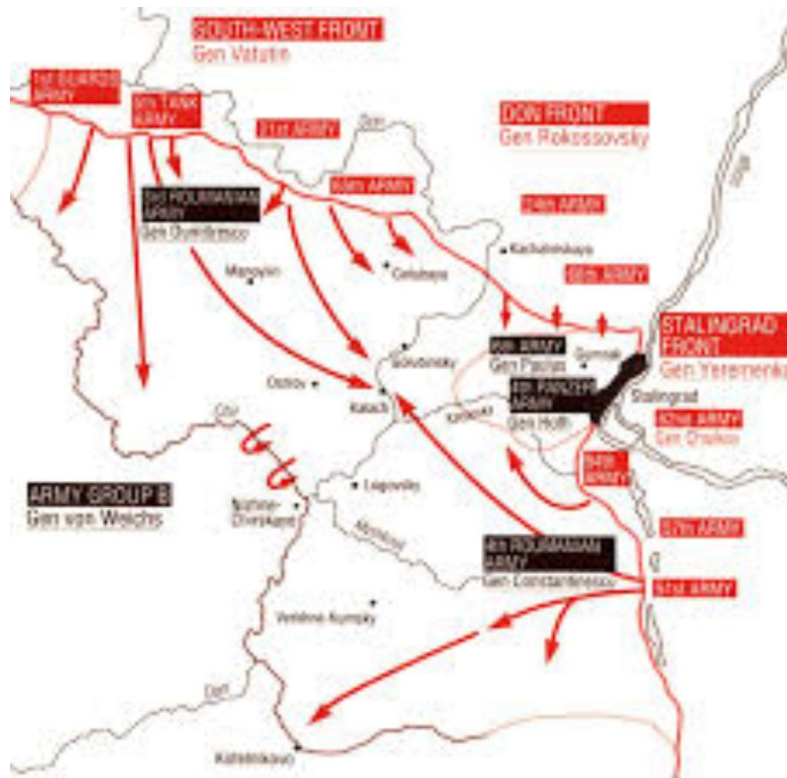


Illustration 12: Operation Uranus. The Soviets attempted to drive even farther west, to the Don River, but were halted. Regardless, they surrounded close to 300,000 German and Axis forces in and around Stalingrad.

By November 22nd, the Soviet pincers had linked up, locking the Germans and their allies in what would become an ever-shrinking pocket. At Hitler's headquarters, panic nearly set in. Debate raged for days over whether the German 6th Army, which was in the city, should be ordered to try to break out to the German lines or if Generals Erich von Manstein and Hermann Hoth should break into the city. They even debated on if both should occur, as it would allow the men in the *Kessel* (the German military term meaning "hedgehog") to retreat west. Days went by. At the beginning of December, Manstein launched a large tank offensive in the southwestern portion of the pocket, and for the first day and a half, he made decent progress, but the -40°F weather, poor German morale, and massive Soviet counterattacks stopped the rescue attempt many miles short of the German line.

The failure of Manstein's rescue attempt meant the men in Stalingrad were doomed. Most of them, including General Paulus (who was named Field Marshal in the hope that he would realize a German Field Marshal had never surrendered his troops or been taken alive), surrendered in late January. Another group in the north of the city surrendered in the first week

of February 1943. Ninety-one thousand German and Axis troops went into Soviet captivity, and only five thousand returned home.

For decades, the Battle of Stalingrad was considered to be *the* turning point in the war, not just for the Soviets but also for the Allies. The losses sustained by the Germans at Stalingrad were irreplaceable, and the more cognizant Germans knew this was the beginning of the end. Still, the following summer, Hitler tried one more time to go on the offensive in Russia.

Kursk

The largest tank battle in history began on July 5th, 1943, near the central Soviet city of Kursk in Ukraine. It was the last time the Germans were able to launch an attack of any significance on the Eastern Front. Its codename was Operation Citadel.

Humiliated by the defeat at Stalingrad, Hitler decided to concentrate a huge armored “fist” (as he called it) on both sides of a Soviet bulge in the German lines near Kursk. This would include hundreds of the new Panther and Tiger tanks (the former of which was relatively new and still full of mechanical bugs, mostly in its complicated transmission), along with hundreds of advanced German Mk IV tanks, tank destroyers, and self-propelled guns.

Many of these tanks and armored vehicles belonged to the Waffen-SS units, the armed portion of Heinrich Himmler’s genocidal organization. Beginning as a core battalion of fanatical but relatively inexperienced fighters, by 1943, the Waffen-SS numbered nearly 900,000 men and was a highly skilled and highly motivated force. By the time the Battle of Kursk began, and throughout the rest of the war, the Waffen-SS units would be used as a “fire brigade”—in other words, they were thrown into the front lines where the situation was the direst. Most of the time, they were victorious. When they weren’t, they inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy.

By this point in the war, Soviet intelligence had gotten much better in surmising German moves. They also had cultivated important spies and spy rings within Germany and the German army. The Soviets were helped by the codebreaking efforts of the Western Allies, who were able to inform Stalin about many German plans (although the Allies never told them how found them out). The Soviet reconnaissance forces had gotten much better

as well, and behind German lines, the partisan forces had grown to nearly a million. Much information came to the Red Army from behind German lines.

Unbeknownst to Hitler, the Soviets knew about his plans for Kursk almost as soon as he ordered it. In June 1943, they began to create a series of defensive belts in the area, each one more formidable than the last. Millions of mines were sown, thousands of bunkers were built, and thousands of miles of trenches were dug in the Kursk pocket, which encompassed some one hundred miles north to south and about seventy-five miles east to west.

Hitler moved around 70 percent of his tanks and 60 percent of his planes in the Eastern Front to the Kursk area. The German forces numbered between 800,000 to 900,000 men. They had nearly 3,000 tanks and assault guns, 1,800 aircraft, and around 10,000 guns and mortars.

In addition to the unbelievable number of mines, trenches, and other defenses the Soviets prepared, they had anywhere between 1.5 and 1.9 million men, 5,000 tanks, 25,000 guns and mortars, and between 2,700 and 3,500 planes. When they counterattacked, these numbers increased significantly.

The Soviets did not know exactly where the Germans would attack in the Kursk bulge, but they had a pretty good idea. In the north, the Germans planned to attack south of the city of Orel. In the south, they would attack north of Belgorod, hoping the two pincers would link up behind the Soviets at the western end of the bulge and cut them off, just like the old days of 1941.

This was not to be. The Soviets knew almost exactly when the German attack was to begin. To throw the Nazis off, the Red Army began its own massive artillery barrage just before the Germans were to begin theirs. It was a bad omen for the German troops, and it took hours for the men to get organized enough to move forward. Commanding the Soviet effort at Kursk was none other than Marshal Georgy Zhukov, the architect of the defense of Leningrad, Moscow, and Operation Uranus.

However, when the Germans did attack, they initially made good progress, especially in the south. But unlike past battles, where the Germans' initial attacks might progress for weeks or even a month, this one didn't last a week. Though the German Tiger and Panther tanks were superior to the Soviet T-34, that tank had been up-gunned, and the Soviets had much

greater numbers. On many occasions, Soviet tanks would not fire on the German Tigers, for even their up-gunned tanks would not make a dent on the German monsters at a distance. Instead, one or more T-34s would ram the Tigers, hoping to damage and immobilize them. And on many occasions, it worked.

Still, for much of the battle, the experienced German tankers made a much heavier dent on the Soviets, but the Reds could afford the losses. The Germans could not. On top of fighting Soviet tanks, the Germans had to defuse or negotiate minefields and massive groups of Soviet anti-tank guns. These guns, especially when up against the Tigers, would all fire on one tank, destroy it, and then move to the next one.

By July 10th, the German offensive in the north had stalled. Hitler ordered the attack in the south to be reinforced and redoubled. On July 12th, a battle took place near the village of Prokhorovka. This was where the largest tank battle to ever take place occurred.



Illustration 13: Artist's depiction of the battle near Prokhorovka, July 12th, 1943.

At Prokhorovka, the earth literally shook for miles as the German and Soviet tanks took the field. In the area were some 1,400 German and Soviet tanks. On the field of Prokhorovka, 600 Soviet and nearly 300 German armored vehicles charged at each other. They were accompanied by supporting infantrymen and aircraft. Men were blown apart, run over, burned alive, riddled with bullets, and died of smoke inhalation.

When the battle was over, the Soviets had lost more men and tanks, but as a percentage of their forces, the Germans had suffered more, as they could not replace their losses. Hitler called off the offensive for this reason. Also, at the height of the battle, he had gotten word that the Western Allies had invaded Sicily, meaning tanks and men were needed there. It wouldn't have mattered if they stayed. The Germans were finished on the Eastern Front. For them, there was nothing but the long march back to Berlin.

Bagration

Bagration wasn't a battle: it was an operation that encompassed hundreds of them. Operation Bagration was named after a 19th-century Russian officer in the Imperial Russian Army who became a national hero during the Napoleonic Wars. He actually wasn't Russian—he was Georgian, just like Josef Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili, better known to history as Stalin. This was not a coincidence.

Operation Bagration was the largest offensive undertaken by the Red Army during WWII in both scope and size. It began some three weeks after the Western Allies landed in France and was, in part, meant to draw German troops away from the hard fighting in Normandy.

Bagration began on June 23rd, 1944. More than one and a half million Soviet troops from Leningrad to the borders of southern Belarus attacked the Germans along a front that stretched nearly 700 miles. They were accompanied by 5,800 tanks and assault guns; over 30,000 cannons, rocket launchers, and mortars; and nearly 8,000 aircraft. For comparison, the German assault of 1941 took place on a front of 1,200 miles and included half the number of tanks the Soviets harnessed for Operation Bagration.

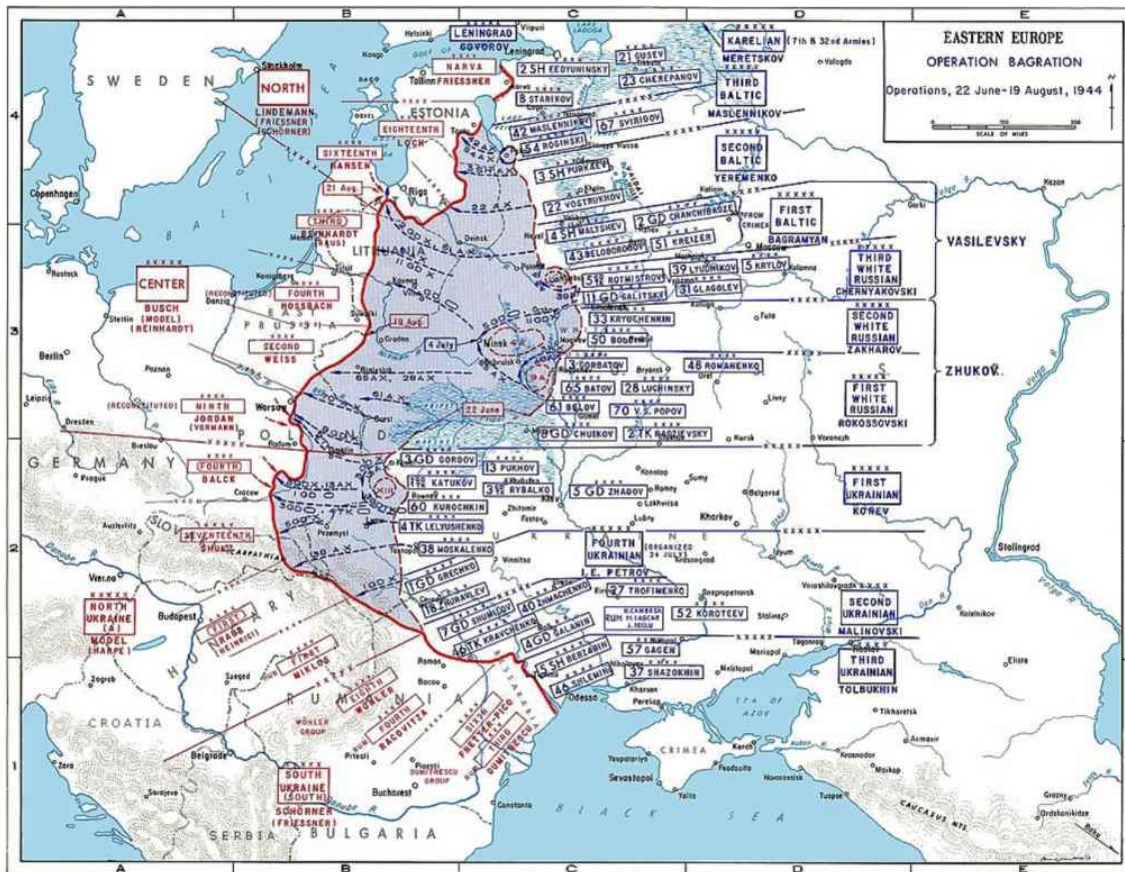


Illustration 14: Operation Bagration was unreal in its scope and size. (Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=193193>).

The Germans faced the Soviet wave with just half a million combat personnel. Support forces numbered another 700,000, and these were picked through to reinforce the front lines (i.e., troops with little or no combat experience). They could only muster 200 functional tanks, 500 assault guns/tank destroyers, 3,300 guns, and just under 1,000 aircraft.

The Soviets attacked in six places in four main army fronts. Despite sustaining heavy casualties because of the Germans' defensive skills, the Soviets pushed the Germans back nearly 400 miles by the end of August. By the time Operation Bagration was over (along with concurrent Soviet offensives in the south into Romania), no German troops were left in the Soviet Union. The Soviets themselves had penetrated Germany itself, as they had pushed into East Prussia and were at the gates of Warsaw, the Polish capital.

This Soviet presence outside Warsaw was an upsetting episode and had consequences for the relationship between the Soviet Union and the

Western Allies for years to come. This is not the place for a detailed analysis of what happened in Poland in the summer of 1944, but in short, underground rebel forces in Warsaw, most of them anti-communist, rose up against the Nazis when the Soviets approached. They hoped that liberating their capital without Soviet help or before the Soviets could enter the city would give them more leverage in post-war talks about the nature of the future Polish government.

The Polish forces were divided. Defying incredible odds, a considerable number had made their way to England and France when their country fell to Hitler. Many joined the new “Polish Armed Forces in the West” and the Royal Air Force, and they fought with distinction and great bravery in virtually every theater in the Western Front. The pre-war Polish government went into exile in London and viewed itself as the only legitimate Polish government.

Many other Poles, some by choice, others by necessity, fled to the Soviet Union when the Germans invaded in 1941. At first, these Poles were treated with great suspicion and harshness by Stalin, but as the war turned against him, many Poles were drafted into Polish units of the Red Army. Many also volunteered. They, too, fought with bravery. Many of them were not communists, but a great deal was, and their leaders certainly were. They fully intended to dominate post-war Poland after the war.

Stalin ordered his troops to stop their advance at the River Vistula just across from Warsaw. Truth be told, many Red Army units were exhausted and depleted. However, there were more than enough units to take the fight into Warsaw to help the Poles. Additionally, nothing was stopping the Soviet air force from dropping supplies in Warsaw and bombing the Germans. But nothing happened. Britain and the United States pleaded with Stalin to aid the Poles or allow them to fly supplies in, which they could have easily done. However, Stalin denied them landing rights in areas under Soviet control, which many of them would have needed.

So, the Red Army watched as the Nazis destroyed the Polish 1944 Uprising. Warsaw was flattened; literally 90 percent of the buildings in the capital was wiped out. Thousands of anti-communist Poles were killed, which was just what Stalin wanted. It was not until January 1945, when the Soviets began their final offensive, that they entered the city. At Yalta, both Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt had to face facts and realize that nothing was going to remove Stalin from Poland.

Berlin

The Battle of Berlin, like the other battles described here, deserves its own book. Thousands have been written on the subject already, but we'll give you a brief outline of the battle that ended WWII in Europe for our purposes here.

The battle for the Nazi capital began on April 16th, 1945, four days before Hitler's fifty-sixth birthday. By this time, Hitler was a drug-addled and crazed semblance of the man he was when the war began. He was living in a bunker far below the city center with a coterie of Nazi Party leaders, notably Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels and his family and Party Secretary Martin Bormann. Along for the end was Hitler's girlfriend, Eva Braun, whom he married on April 29th.

The Soviets likely could have begun the battle for the capital in February, but the Yalta Conference was held from February 4th to the 11th. This conference was a meeting between Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill in the Crimean city of the same name, which had been called to discuss post-war Europe and the world. Many troublesome questions needed to be answered before the final stages of the war began in the spring, and one of them was who was going to take Berlin.

Though there has been some debate on whether the Western Allies could have driven on to the German capital, it was made clear at Yalta that the honor would fall to the Soviets. Of the three Great Powers, they were the only country that had been invaded by Hitler. An astounding 90 percent of all German military casualties took place in the fight against the Red Army. On the other hand, over twenty million Soviets had died or been killed due to the Nazi invasion.

Many people do not know this, but the Red Army units fought each other for the right to be the first troops into the Reichstag (the German parliament). Imagine what might have happened had British or American troops been there.

By April 25th, the city was surrounded. Berlin had basically been razed to the ground by the American and British bombing campaigns, but the Soviets were going to make sure the Germans were not only defeated but also got a taste of their own medicine. It is estimated that around the city of Berlin, which was not a small city by any means, the Soviets had nearly 30,000 artillery pieces and mortars—one every ten yards around the city—

that were rows deep. When the final barrage began, the Soviet artillery would have been seen from space.

Inside Berlin, the SS, the fanatical shock troops of the Nazi movement, began a terror campaign against anyone they believed to have shirked their duty or deserted. Hundreds, if not thousands, of Germans were shot. Many were hanged from trees, light posts, or makeshift gallows, with their bodies left to rot with signs around their necks saying things like, “I am a filthy traitor and have betrayed the Führer and Fatherland!” Some of these victims were teenagers and women.

The youth branch of the Nazi Party, the Hitler Youth, was armed. Children as young as ten were sent to the front lines. Old men and wounded veterans made their way there as well as part of the *Volkssturm* (“People’s Storm”). Armed with the effective anti-tank *Panzerfaust*, these ill-trained troops managed to inflict many casualties on the Soviet units. In turn, many of these German forces were wiped out completely.

When the Soviets entered the city, intense street fighting began. For a few days, savage battles took place all over the city—in the streets, shells of buildings, and sewers. Sometimes, surrendering Germans would be taken as prisoners. Sometimes, they fought to the last bullet and killed themselves with it, as did civilians all over Germany, for they believed the Allies would kill the men and rape the women. Other times, surrendering Germans were killed on the spot. It really was an odds game.

Before the battle began, the Soviets went on a rampage throughout the liberated areas of eastern Germany. Villages were burnt to the ground. Tens, maybe hundreds of thousands, of German women and girls were raped, with many killed afterward, either by the Germans or their own hand. Atrocities were widespread, and they only increased every time the Soviets discovered a German extermination camp on their march westward. By the time they got to Berlin, what Soviet propaganda often called “The Lair of the Beast,” many Red Army troops went berserk. During the battle and for days afterward, raping and killing were the orders for the day. The Soviet high command looked the other way but ordered it to stop after some weeks went by. This was not done out of pity, but because it was becoming counterproductive to Soviet post-war plans to occupy the eastern part of Germany, as had been agreed at Yalta.

When the Battle of Berlin was over, the Germans had over 100,000 dead. The Soviets had an equal number. Nearly 500,000 German troops were taken prisoner, and many never returned. About 25,000 German civilians were killed as a result of the fighting. One of them was Adolf Hitler, who gave a cyanide capsule to his wife, Eva, before shooting himself in the temple.

WWII in Europe officially ended on May 8th, 1945, with the formal surrender of the German armed forces and Hitler's designated successor, Admiral Karl Dönitz.



Illustration 15: Red Army soldiers tossing captured Nazi banners to the ground in Red Square, Moscow, 1945.

nclusion

The war in Europe ended in May 1945. According to an agreement reached with Roosevelt at Yalta, Stalin declared war on Japan two months after Germany's defeat. All along the Soviet borders with China, Manchuria, and Korea, Soviet troops attacked the Japanese Imperial Army, which still numbered a million troops.

It was no contest as to who was the strongest. The Japanese had no fight left in them. The Americans were closing in on the Japanese Home Islands, and millions of Chinese and other Asian peoples, who had been held down by the Japanese for years, were about to be at their throats. The Soviets marched in with ease. They occupied the Kurile Islands and the formerly divided (between the USSR and Japan) Sakhalin Island to the north of Japan. It appeared that they might try to invade the northernmost Japanese island of Hokkaido as well—at least that was a fear of the Americans.

The atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki stopped all that. Though some scholars and others on the Left have said the US used the bombs to dissuade the Soviets from any further moves in Asia and China, that was not the case. The bomb was dropped to defeat Japan, but dissuading the Soviets was certainly a positive side-effect, at least from an American political point of view.

The Soviet Union, despite not having the atomic bomb (it would develop its own in 1949), was now one of two world “superpowers.” Its army was the biggest in the world, though its strategic air force and navy were dwarfed by the US forces. Still, Eastern Europe was firmly under Soviet control, and despite Stalin's pledges to hold “free elections” in nations occupied by his armies, those free elections never happened. In the Baltic states, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria, and eastern Germany (which became the German Democratic Republic in 1949), Soviet armies backed home-grown Stalin-approved communists. Only one Eastern European nation of any size remained independent of the Soviets: Yugoslavia. Numerous partisan forces had liberated their country, and their leader, Josip Broz Tito, was firmly against Stalin's demands.

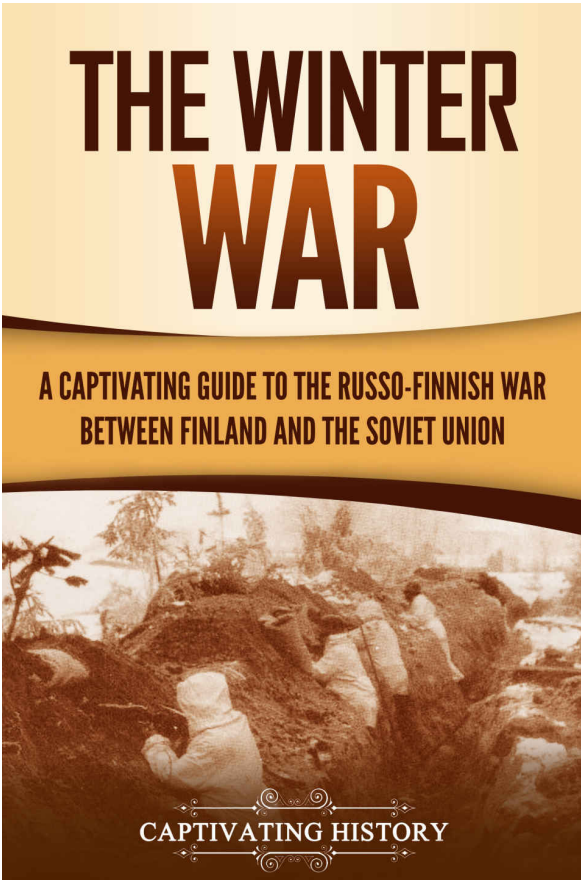
Still, the USSR itself was a disaster. The war set the nation back years. The population didn't achieve pre-war levels until the end of the 1950s. The economy did not come back until then or even later. Even today, the war is remembered not only as a great victory but also as an inhuman catastrophe.

To this day, the leaders of Russia are extraordinarily suspicious of the West and zealous about guarding their borders.

Of course, between the end of WWII and 1991, the US and the USSR “fought” the Cold War, a conflict using proxy armies, politics, economics, propaganda, spying, assassinations, and much more. For a time in the 1990s, the world thought this was a part of the past. With the arrival of Vladimir Putin, who is very much a student of history, a new Cold War has begun.

Part 2: The Winter War

*A Captivating Guide to the Russo-Finnish War
between Finland and the Soviet Union*



Introduction

In December 1940, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill made a speech about a conflict that had some leading figures in Britain and France, including Churchill himself, briefly discussing the idea of going to war with the Soviet Union, even though they were already fighting Adolf Hitler. While that notion was quickly dismissed, Churchill's summation of the fighting between Finland and the USSR was scathing in its criticism of Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union and fulsome in its praise of the Finns.

All Scandinavia dwells brooding under Nazi and Bolshevik threats. Only Finland—superb, nay, sublime—in the jaws of peril—Finland shows what free men can do. The service rendered by Finland to mankind is magnificent. They have exposed, for all the world to see, the military incapacity of the Red Army and of the Red Air Force. Many illusions about Soviet Russia have been dispelled in these few fierce weeks of fighting in the Arctic Circle. Everyone can see how Communism rots the soul of a nation; how it makes it abject and hungry in peace, and proves it base and abominable in war.

Of course, war makes strange bedfellows, and one year later, Churchill would find himself allied with the Soviet Union against Germany and Finland. It's an interesting saga, one with roots in imperial Russian history and the desire of the Finns to be free in their northern forests.

Chapter 1 – The Grand Duchy of Finland

In the 1500s, the territory we now call the nation of Finland came under Swedish control. Prior to that, the Finns existed in a series of small and larger kingdoms, earldoms, tribal areas, and clan territories. Over time, these came and went, and they were subjected, in large part, to control or influence by its larger and more powerful neighbors, namely Sweden and Russia.

From the 16th century until 1809, Finland was a grand duchy of Sweden. The titular head of state was the grand duke, which was another title for the Swedish kings. In 1807, Russian Tsar Alexander I and French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte signed the Treaties of Tilsit, which arrayed Russia and France against Napoleon's enemies, Britain and Sweden (then a force to be reckoned with in northern Europe). Of course, this was before Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812. In 1807, however, the young Russian tsar was in awe of Bonaparte, as were many others in Europe.

As part of their arrangement, Napoleon agreed that Russia should control Finland, and in 1808, Russia invaded the Swedish Grand Duchy of Finland. The Russians found the fighting in Finland difficult, something they would discover again 120 years later, but within a year, the territory had been absorbed into the Russian Empire.

This happened for two reasons. First, the Finns, though they fought a brave and tenacious guerrilla war against the Russians, could not hope to hold out against the Russian numbers. This, too, would be the same story over a century later.

Second, as Alexander I had promised Napoleon and his satellite state of Denmark, the Russians warred with Sweden in the west, forcing the Swedes to decide what was more important to them, the wilds of Finland or access to the Atlantic through the Baltic and North Seas. So, the Swedes chose to give up Finland to the Russians, which many Finns saw as a betrayal.

Though Sweden had ruled Finland for centuries, the Finns enjoyed a high level of autonomy, and though there were occasional problems, the Finns and Swedes, who were a large minority, managed to coexist in relative peace. Even today, there are parts of Sweden where Finnish is spoken and vice versa. Additionally, the Finns and Swedes shared a common religious outlook in Lutheranism, whereas the Russians practiced another form of Christianity known as Eastern Orthodoxy. Many Finns feared that they

would be forced to convert and that the Russian numbers would overwhelm them in their own country.

Though it was Napoleon's agreement with Tsar Alexander that caused Finland to be absorbed by Russia, in a way, the Finns could be "thankful" for Napoleon, as he soon began eyeing Russia as his next target for an invasion. The Finnish resistance to the Russian invasion was enough to convince the Russians that they would need to keep a substantial force in Finland in order to control it—a force that they were quickly coming to believe they would need against the French.

In 1809, an agreement was reached between the tsar and the Finnish parliament. Finland would be a part of Russia and pay taxes to the Russian Crown, but it would enjoy a high level of autonomy. Tsar Alexander also returned some territories to Finland that had been taken by Russia in other conflicts. Besides making the Finns pay taxes, they would have to fight in Russia's wars, but, at least under Alexander I (who reigned from 1801 to 1825), the Finns had a relatively free hand in their own affairs, though a Russian governor-general would oversee the duchy in the name of the tsar.

Toward the end of Alexander's reign, however, things began to change. Two years before his death, a new Russian governor-general named Arseny Zakrevsky was appointed, and he was much more heavy-handed than the Finns (and the Finnish Swedes) were used to. He was also deeply involved in Russian palace intrigue and attempted to bring Finland under the direct control of who he believed would be the next tsar after Alexander. In the meantime, he angered many Finns with edicts and interference in their affairs.

Zakrevsky bet on the wrong horse in the race for the Russian throne, and Alexander's successor, Nicholas I, pledged to maintain Finland's autonomy, but over the course of the next decades, an ever-increasing Russification took place in Finland. Conservatives in the Russian government pressed for the people in Finland to use the Russian language in its school, courts, and press. The Finnish upper-classes were divided: some of them willingly became more "Russian" when it came to politics and culture, and they adopted Russian habits, diets, and dress as a way of moving up the social ladder or into more powerful positions. Others resisted Russification, but this did not mean they took to the streets or fought some kind of guerrilla war. It was more of a quiet resistance performed with thoughts, deeds, and speeches.

During the 1830s and the 1840s, waves of nationalism swept Europe, powered by the Romantic movement in the arts. Finns were caught up in this as well, and they pressed for more and more autonomy. This movement also pressed for more democracy, and Russia experienced some turmoil in their capital of Petrograd (now known as Saint Petersburg), which was located just over the Finnish border, in 1830/31. This, in true Russian fashion, was put down with some harshness, but the unrest did not spill into Finland itself. Nicholas I essentially left Finland alone until about 1850.

By 1850, the waves of nationalism had begun to come ashore in Finland as well, in the form of the Fennoman movement, which essentially promoted the Finnish language and culture. More extreme elements within this movement called for the rejection of Russian Orthodoxy in the country and the unification of all Finns into one country, as there were sizable Finnish populations in Sweden, Russia, and Estonia (which speaks a language closely related to Finnish).

This movement and the spirit of Finnish nationalism were bound together in the publication of the Finnish national epic known as the *Kalevala*, which spoke of ancient Finnish mythology and ancient heroes, such as the warrior Väinämöinen. (Just to be clear, Finnish mythology is not Norse mythology, though there are some similarities.)

The nationwide publishing of the *Kalevala* and the movement to teach and publish in Finnish led to a backlash in the Russian government, the Swedish elite (which dominated academia), and, most importantly, Tsar Nicholas I, who, like so many other people before him, became more conservative with age.

During the Crimean War, which took place between 1853 and 1856, the Russians fought against the English, French, and Turks. During the war, the Allied fleets bombarded Finnish coastal forts and islands, causing great resentment among the Finns, most of whom felt they had nothing to do with Russia's fight in far-off Crimea. Moreover, the attacks came as a shock, for at this time, all newspapers were in Russian, and most Finns did not read that language. In response, there were demands for the people to use the Finnish language more, as well as more autonomy for the Finnish parliament.

When Nicholas I died in 1855, his successor, Alexander II, took a more liberal line with Finland. This happened for a number of reasons. Firstly, Alexander was generally a more liberal leader. Secondly, the progressive

spirit that had animated western Europe in the 1830s and 1840s was now finding a home in Russia, and Alexander personified it. Though some Finns thought that Alexander would not allow them greater freedoms, as what they wanted for their parliament and press was not even allowed in Russia itself, Alexander knew that opposing their wishes at this point would only lead to more problems, which he could not afford, considering it would be coming on the heels of the Crimean War defeat.

Alexander was a reformer at home, too, but to many, the tsar was a symbol of oppression, and so, Alexander II was assassinated by radical revolutionaries in 1881. In response, his son, Alexander III, imposed a reactionary and harsh rule as Alexander II's predecessors had done, and it affected not only Russia but Finland as well. From the time of Alexander III (r. 1881–1894) to the rule of Nicholas II (r. 1894–1917), Finland's autonomy was gradually reduced, and most of Alexander II's reforms were reversed, causing greater resentment among the Finns.

Among the many things caused by this new program of Russification in Finland was a reconciliation between the Finns and the sizable (and relatively wealthy) Swedish minority in Finland. In part, this was brought on by a nascent movement in Russia and eastern Europe known as Pan-Slavism, which was the idea that all Slavs should be under one roof and that conquered nations such as Finland should gradually be assimilated, both culturally and demographically. Obviously, this didn't play well with the Finns, and it drove the Swedes in Finland closer to their Scandinavian cousins as well.

Another bone of contention was the economic success of Finland. Finland had a more advanced economy that was less feudal and more industrial in nature than Russia, and this bred resentment in the Russian capital. Russian nationalists in and outside the government called on the tsar for greater taxation on Finland, which in turn sparked more and more resentment among the Finns and helped to create socialist and communist movements in Finland, something that would have consequences until the outbreak of the Winter War in 1939.

Additionally, Nicholas II appointed a general, Nikolay Bobrikov, to be the governor-general of Finland, and he soon became the most hated man in the country. Bobrikov treated Finland as his own fiefdom, instituting laws and taxes without consulting the Finns at all. The once semi-independent Finnish Army was dissolved in 1901, and a military draft was instituted

instead, which called for Finns to serve five years in the Imperial Russian Army. This could mean stationing in Ukraine, which was seven hundred miles from Helsinki, or even farther away: for instance, Vladivostok, on the Pacific coast of Russia, was 6,125 miles from the Finnish capital. Before air travel became more commonplace, soldiers hardly ever came home at those distances.

In 1905, when Russia was defeated in the Russo-Japanese War, and revolution briefly appeared in Russia, many leading Finns saw an opportunity to regain some of their lost freedoms. They remade their parliament, declared universal suffrage (including women—something no other European nation had done up to that point), and drew up a new constitution. However, it was all for naught, as Bobrikov's successor, Pyotr Stolypin, was even harsher toward Russia's minorities. This continued until the outbreak of World War I.

World War I was not unexpected. In the years before the outbreak of the war in 1914, many people in Europe and around the world knew that it was just a matter of time before the major countries of Europe fought each other. In Finland, the nationalists secretly prepared for an uprising against the tsar, and about two hundred Finns (it grew to over 1,500 by war's end) traveled to Germany to form the 27th Jäger ("hunter") Battalion, which fought against the Russians on the Eastern Front.

Most of the men that survived the war and returned to Finland later fought in the Finnish Civil War in 1918, which broke out after the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II and the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. Tsar Nicholas II of Russia abdicated his throne in 1917, and the Provisional Government of Alexander Kerensky took power until they were deposed by Vladimir Lenin's communist faction, known as the Bolsheviks. What followed in Russia had great implications for Finland.

Lenin immediately withdrew Russian (now known as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the Soviet Union, or simply the USSR for short) forces from the battlefields of World War I. Germany imposed a draconian peace treaty on Russia and took all of Ukraine and a large chunk of western Russia for itself. Lenin, with his hands full in forming a new state and fighting a civil war against supporters of the old tsarist regime, had no choice but to agree to these terms.

For some time, before the fall of the tsar in Russia, there had been a low-level guerrilla war for independence going on in Finland. This movement

was a reaction to the harsh measures and attempts to Russify the nation. By the time of the Bolshevik Revolution, many people in Finland were pushing for independence from Russia, either actively or privately. On December 6th, 1917, Finland declared independence from Russia, which is celebrated today as Finland's Independence Day. As Lenin had his hands full, he signed off on Finland's independence with virtually no conditions.



Illustration 1: Letter to Finland's parliament from Lenin with his signature, agreeing to Finland's independence.

Chapter 2 – The Finnish Civil War

Finland was a territory of Russia for over one hundred years. For much of that time, the Finns enjoyed a level of autonomy that no other people in the Russian Empire had enjoyed, but as we saw in the prior chapter, Russian governors, at the end of the 19th and the start of the 20th century, began to try to impose more and more of Russia's culture on Finland and frequently negated the actions of the Finnish parliament.

With the rise of the Bolsheviks in Russia, who called for greater autonomy for the peoples of the Russian Empire, Finland demanded independence, and to the surprise of many around the world, it got it.

However, just what type of government Finland was to have was still a big question. Lenin did not grant independence for Finland without a plan in the back of his mind. He knew there was a sizable Finnish Communist Party and that they were very strong in the cities of the nation, where the majority of the population lived.

In the Russian Civil War, which took place between 1917 and 1921, the communists were known as the Reds, as red stood for the "blood of the workers." Opposing them were the Whites, as white had been the color of many of the royal families of Europe. In

Finland, it was the same: red for the communists, whites for the conservatives (it should be mentioned there was no Finnish royal family, though there were aristocrats that had held titles from the time of Russian imperial rule). While the Reds were strong in the cities, the Whites were strong in the countryside and among the elite, which included the aristocracy, businesses, and large landowners. In 1917, Finland's population was only 3.1 million, but unlike today, most of them lived in the countryside, small towns, and villages. Most of these people tended to be conservative in outlook.

Supporting the Finnish Reds, the Bolsheviks in Russia sent what weapons they could along with a small number of Russian troops. The Whites were supported by troops, weapons, and money from Germany, which hoped to keep the Russians as weak as possible and who had received Finnish volunteers in their own war effort.



Illustration 2: Communist POWs massacred by White forces during the civil war.

The war was not only fought on battlefields but also in the press and in the streets. There were violent attacks and a number of politically motivated killings. Large numbers of White prisoners lost their lives or were sent to camps in Russia, never to return. Conversely, an estimated twelve thousand Red prisoners died of exposure, malnutrition, and disease. In total, almost forty thousand people lost their lives during the war, the vast majority of which were Finns (Russians, Swedes, and Germans made up the rest).

Over the course of the short civil war, which lasted from the end of January to mid-May 1918, there were four major battles: the Battle of Tampere, which was a costly urban battle for the city of the same name, the Battle of Helsinki (Finland's capital), the Battle of Lahti, and the Battle of Vyborg. Though the Reds did win a number of smaller skirmishes in the war, these major battles were White/German victories, and they were decisive. Many of the surviving Red forces and politicians fled to the Soviet Union. Some of them would make an appearance in the run-up to and during the Winter War.

In the aftermath of the civil war, a portion of the Whites wanted to form a constitutional monarchy with a German prince as the Finnish king. The reasons behind this run deep in history, but after much debate and sometimes vitriolic arguments, it was decided that Finland would be a parliamentary democracy.

This was helped by the fact that Germany had been defeated in World War I, and the “Big Three,” which consisted of Great Britain, France, and the United States, pushed for the establishment of republics in Europe. Hoping to garner international support for their new nation and for some of their territorial claims in the USSR (there were sizable Finnish populations on the Soviet side of the border), the Finns formed a new democratic government in 1918. One of the greatest achievements of the new nation was universal suffrage—women voted in the formation of the new government and were a part of it.

There were a number of heroes of the Finnish Civil War, but the man who emerged from the conflict with the most fame and notoriety was Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim, who would play a central role in the Winter War and whom we will devote a chapter to in the pages to come.

Chapter 3 – Between a Rock and a Hard Place

Finland's new government was a unicameral parliament with a prime minister as the head of government and a president as the head of state, much like many other modern European nations. In the years between the Finnish Civil War and the Winter War, the Finnish government leaned more toward the conservative side, with many of its leading figures being men from larger businesses or old established families.

Still, despite its conservative leanings, Finland managed to steer a relatively moderate course in the 1930s, avoiding extremes on both the left and right. As 1939 approached, the most left-leaning party was the Social Democratic Party of Finland, which was lightyears more moderate than the Communists, most of whom had been driven far underground or had fled to the Soviet Union. On the right, there were a smattering of parties, from the Lapua Movement to the Patriotic People's Movement, which had links to Mussolini and Hitler, but these parties, like the Communists, were on the margins of Finnish society, especially after the Lapua Movement attempted a coup d'état in 1932.

In its foreign relations, Finland was between a rock and a hard place. Its geography made dealing with the Soviet Union unavoidable, and though many Finns inside and outside of the government hated the USSR and the Russians in general, there was no choice except to get along with Stalin as well as possible.

On the other hand, the growing power of Nazi Germany also demanded the Finns' attention. Though many Finns viewed Hitler with alarm and caution, they also had been aided by Germany in the Finnish Civil War. Germany under Kaiser Wilhelm II had sent arms and men to Finland before the end of World War I, aiding the Finns in their struggle against the Communists, who received money, arms, and men from the USSR. But, like others in Europe, Finland watched Hitler's rise to world power with alarm.

One choice left to Finland was some sort of alliance system or closer relationship with its smaller neighbors. Aligning itself with France and Britain was an option that was explored, but any move to establish a military alliance was fraught with danger, not only for the Finns but also for the Western Allies. Britain and France were concerned that any alliance with Finland might drag them into a war with the Soviet Union, and Germany would not look kindly on such an alliance either. Remember,

Finland's population was just over three million people in 1939, while the populations of the USSR and Germany were around 150 to 170 million and 70 million, respectively.

Of those smaller neighbors, the richest and most "powerful" was Sweden. Finland's ties with Sweden were ancient, and many people of Swedish descent (one of them being Mannerheim) lived in Finland, and vice versa. Though Finland had been a part of the Kingdom of Sweden before 1809, relations between the two countries were good, and much business was done with each other.

However, Sweden was in a similar position as Finland. Though it did not share a border with the Soviet Union, the giant nation still cast a large shadow. In many nations of the world at that time, Soviet agents and native communists worked to undermine the capitalist social order and forge a path to power for communism. If that was not enough to give Sweden pause, the military might of the Soviet Union, at least on paper, would have been.

And although most Swedes did not like Hitler and his regime, Sweden did increase business with Nazi Germany as the 1930s wore on. In fact, Sweden was a significant source of Germany's iron and much of its nickel, as well as other resources. Although an alliance with Finland would not have necessarily been frowned upon by Hitler, anything that made Sweden stronger and more likely to refuse Hitler's "requests" would not be a good thing.

Lastly, Sweden had made it a policy for some time that it would, like Switzerland, remain neutral in any conflicts that did not threaten the country itself. A formal alliance with Finland would violate that policy.

But though it remained officially neutral, Sweden did sell a limited number of arms to the Finns, and its intelligence services shared much information. On occasion, the militaries of both countries, especially their small navies, conducted exercises together. Still, this was a far cry from any kind of mutual defense pact.

The only sort of mutual aid pact that the Finns were able to put together in the years before the war was with the small and newly independent nation of Estonia. Estonia, like Finland, had been a part of the Russian Empire, but it had gotten its independence after the Bolshevik Revolution. The other two Baltic nations, Latvia and Lithuania, entertained the idea of entering into this agreement, but as they were even closer to Germany than Finland

and still near the Soviet Union, they decided it was best to try to walk a fine line between the two great powers.

Finland and Estonia shared more than just an antipathy toward the USSR. Along with Hungary, Finland and Estonia share a language root. The Finno-Ugric branch of European languages are only spoken by these three nations, and Hungarian is so far distant from the other two as to be unintelligible. The Finns and Estonians, however, can understand each other well enough. They also share a linked history, as they are right across the Baltic Sea from each other.

There was one big problem with the Finnish-Estonian agreement. While the two nations did exchange helpful intelligence at times, neither one posed much of a threat to the Soviets. Estonia is much smaller than Finland geographically, and its population was even smaller than that of the Finns: just over one million people, where it still stands today. In the end, the agreement did not amount to much, and along with the Finns, the Estonians found themselves the target of Josef Stalin's Soviet Union.

Chapter 4 – The Red Menace

The Bolshevik Revolution and the Russian Civil War, which took place between 1917 and 1922, gave Finland some time to establish its government and society on its own terms. By defeating the Reds in their own civil war, the Finns clearly thumbed their noses at Lenin and the ruling Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

During the time of Lenin, some of the nations that had not been in the Russian Empire for very long or had been in its orbit intermittently were able to achieve their independence. Finland was one; the Baltic States were three others. The other European state that became a nation in the time after the Bolshevik Revolution and World War I was Poland, which had at various times been divided among the USSR, Germany, and Austria-Hungary.

For the other peoples of the Russian Empire, such as the Ukrainians, Georgians, Armenians, and Azerbaijanis, the Bolshevik Revolution and the rise of the Communists changed nothing, and the man that held the title of People's Commissar of Nationalities of the Russian Federative Socialist Republic, which was the name of Russia within the Soviet Union, was none other than one Iosif (Josef) Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili, a Georgian who became the embodiment of Russia and who was known to the entire world simply as Stalin—his alias, meaning “Man of Steel.”

Vladimir Lenin suffered his first stroke in May 1922. In December of that year, he suffered a second stroke. Though he was diminished by his strokes, Lenin remained atop the power pyramid in the USSR, but behind the scenes, Josef Stalin and his archenemy, Leon Trotsky, vied for power.

Between his first and third stroke, which hit him in March 1923, Lenin put together what became his political will and testament. In it, he clearly favored Trotsky as the future leader of the USSR, though he believed him to be egotistical, high-handed, and aloof. Trotsky was also a very able administrator and had led the Red Army during the Russian Civil War.

Of Stalin, who had slowly grown in power within the Communist Party, Lenin said:

Stalin is too crude, and this defect which is entirely acceptable in our milieu and in relationships among us as communists, becomes unacceptable in the position of General Secretary. I therefore propose to comrades that they should devise a means of removing him from

this job and should appoint to this job someone else who is distinguished from comrade Stalin in all other respects only by the single superior aspect that he should be more tolerant, more polite and more attentive towards comrades, less capricious.

After a long struggle with many ups and downs, Lenin died on January 21st, 1924. Almost immediately, Stalin pounced. Trotsky, who had been by Lenin's side for the Bolsheviks' rise to power, was in the Caucasus region resting, and he was not notified of Lenin's death and was conspicuously not at the funeral to give a eulogy, as Stalin and other party leaders did.

Stalin then moved to place himself as Lenin's chosen heir, even though the contents of Lenin's letter were read to the Communist leadership. Stalin, in a rare show of humility, offered to give up his newly acquired position of general secretary of the Communist Party, but his offer was refused because it showed penance. Stalin next made a series of lectures on Lenin and Leninism, which turned him, in the eyes of the public and many in the party, into the heir to Lenin's place in the country.

All the while, as Commissar of Nationalities, Stalin had been putting his own men in positions of power in the various republics of the USSR. As general secretary, he was also able to place his men in top positions in the national party. At the same time, Stalin established relationships with the heads of the secret police.

Trotsky's sole office was as People's Commissar of Military and Naval Affairs of the Soviet Union, which was a position of power. However, this power was squandered by the arrogant way he treated his underlings and his underestimation of Stalin as a crude and not too bright Georgian peasant.

In 1924, matters came to a head. Within the Communist Party, Trotsky led a formidable group of people known as the Left Opposition, which took a more radical stance on many issues. They also asserted that toward the end of his life, Lenin had committed errors in judgment—allowing limited capitalist enterprise in his New Economic Policy was his chief mistake.

By late 1924, Stalin had enough of his supporters in places of power that he felt strong enough to make his move. He acted against former allies, the powerful, well-known revolutionaries Lev Kamenev and Gregory Zinoviev, and replaced them with his own men. Over the course of the next year, these men joined with Trotsky against Stalin, but it was too late. With his control of the secret police and many of the key positions of the Communist Party, not only in the capital but also around the country, Stalin had become

the most powerful man in the Soviet Union. In 1927, Trotsky was put into internal exile, and two years later, he was deported. At the time, Stalin did not feel strong enough to have Trotsky killed since he had been a hero of the revolution and was still revered by many ordinary Soviets. By 1940, though, that had changed, and Stalin sent an assassin to kill Trotsky, who did so by driving an ice ax into Trotsky's head (not an ice pick as legend has it). The blow did not kill Trotsky immediately, but although he put up a tremendous fight, he eventually succumbed to his wound.

By the time of the late 1920s, Stalin's position was unassailable. He had control of all the levers of power and had also released a much-edited version of Lenin's last testament. In Stalin's version, Lenin had chosen him above all others to lead the USSR. From the late 1920s on, no one dared question this version of history.

In the late 1930s, Stalin, who became increasingly paranoid as his power grew, began what is known to history as the Great Terror. In July 1937 alone, Stalin ordered the arrest of over 250,000 people. Over 75,000 were executed on orders personally signed by Stalin and his chief of the secret police (who was later executed himself).

This was just the beginning. Stalin ordered the arrest of many thousands of people, from the most obscure to the most powerful and/or influential. In 1937, he ordered two things that have cemented his place as one of the most ruthless and totalitarian dictators in history. These were the show trials in which leaders of the Communist Party, including Zinoviev and Kamenev, as well as a former ally named Nikolai Bukharin, were put on public display in court. They were berated, tortured both physically and psychologically, and forced to admit "the error of their ways" before they were executed.

Stalin also carried out a purge of the military, which was included as a part of these show trials but was also done in secret. This had a direct effect on the Winter War and the beginning of World War II. During the military purge, experienced officers were removed by the thousands and replaced with "yes-men" with no military skill and Stalin loyalists. Those skilled men who survived either suffered exile or removal, and many of them came back during World War II, but thousands of others were not exiled—they were killed. The only people left were people too terrified to gainsay anything Stalin ordered, which was a major problem for the Soviets as Stalin was not a military genius.

This was the situation within the Soviet Union in the years before the Soviet invasion of Finland. Of course, factors outside of Stalin's control informed his decision to attack Finland in the winter of 1939.

One of the things that Stalin criticized Trotsky for was the latter's desire to actively and openly foment a worldwide communist revolution, an ideology that had not become properly established in the USSR yet. Stalin publicly promoted what he called "Socialism in one country," but that did not mean he wasn't working for gradual world revolution behind the scenes, and it also did not mean that he was going to pass up any opportunities to strengthen the Soviet Union if they came his way. And despite all of his communist rhetoric, Stalin and many others in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union wished to reestablish the boundaries of the Russian Empire.

And that is where they ran into trouble, especially as the 1930s wore on. In 1933, Hitler came to power in Germany. By the end of the decade, the Nazi dictator had established Germany as *the* power in central Europe and had already been in a proxy conflict with the USSR in Spain, where Francisco Franco's fascist "Falange" party had finally defeated the Soviet-supported communists in the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). By the end of the 1930s, Hitler had also annexed Austria to Germany, taken over Czechoslovakia, and had helped establish right-wing governments in Hungary and Romania, which bordered the USSR.

By the spring of 1939, only one major and truly independent nation in central Europe remained: Poland. The Baltic States of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia remained independent nations, but Stalin knew they posed no threat to him—that was unless Hitler got there first. Poland, however, was another story.

During World War II, the Poles lost more people than any other nation in the world—about 20 percent of the population of Poland perished. As it had so many times throughout its history, Poland suffered from its geographic location between Germany and Russia. Once it became a nation again in 1918 after World War I, the Poles were determined to remain free no matter the cost, and that put it directly in the crosshairs of Hitler and Stalin, perhaps two of the most ruthless men in the history of the world.

Fortunately for the Poles, their military was strong, at least when compared to those of the other nations around it, and it was run by able men. Hitler and Stalin were both like wolves who were about to corner a badger. They

knew they could defeat it, but they also knew they were going to get hurt in the process.



Illustration 3: Despite the pact, no one really believed that Hitler and Stalin would remain at peace.

So, to mitigate that injury, Stalin and Hitler, previously the archest of archenemies, agreed in late August of 1939 to divide Poland between them. Hitler would get more of the “living-space” he wanted for the German people and retrieve lands that had been taken from Germany and given to Poland after World War I. For his part, Stalin would be retrieving much of pre-Bolshevik-Revolution Russian territory, and most importantly, he would add hundreds of miles of “buffer zone” between his country and Hitler’s. Other parts of the Nazi-Soviet Pact (or the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, named after the foreign ministers of the two nations) were beneficial for the Soviet Union. It would be “given” the Baltic States (meaning Germany would not interfere when Stalin took them), as well as a slice of Romania, which Hitler had pressured to cede to Stalin. There was also a secret protocol within the pact that gave Stalin assurances that Germany would not interfere if Stalin expanded his territory into Finland. This last declaration would have shocked the Finns, who, while keeping aloof from Hitler, had come to believe that he would aid them significantly should the Soviet Union attack their country.

Within days of signing the pact, Hitler and Stalin attacked Poland, which put up a brave fight but was inevitably defeated. The Baltic States essentially “ran up the white flag,” and the Soviets marched in, annexing those three small nations to the USSR as “autonomous” republics in 1940. After settling the Polish “problem,” Stalin turned his eyes again to Finland, which he had approached in the winter of 1939 with offers that he thought would strengthen the Soviet position in the north in case Hitler decided to invade from that direction and/or use Finland as a proxy.

Chapter 5 – Negotiations, “Refresher Training,” and the Balance of Forces

It may come as some surprise to many that Stalin’s demands of Finland were not that excessive—if requiring a nation to give up parts of its territory can be described in that way. Moreover, Stalin offered the Finns a trade; he would give them Soviet land that the Finns had tried to annex during the Finnish Civil War known as Eastern Karelia, where many people of ethnic Finnish background lived.

In return for this ancestral Finnish homeland, Stalin wanted a number of things. First, he demanded that Finnish territory near the USSR’s “second city” and “Home of the Revolution,” Leningrad (formerly Petrograd and today’s Saint Petersburg), be pushed backward. Stalin’s representative in the talks, who was actually a member of the secret police and not a diplomat, stated that the USSR did not trust Germany and believed it was possible that Hitler would try to use Finland to attack the Soviet Union from the north. Despite Finnish protests that they would maintain neutrality in any conflict between the two great powers, the Soviets saw that Finnish volunteers had fought for Germany in World War I (and a number of these men were now officers in the Finnish Army) and that Germany had sent both arms and troops to Finland in its civil war against the Soviet-supported Finnish Reds. Stalin’s demands also meant that Finland would be required to give up its second-largest city, Viipuri (today’s Vyborg), something it did not want to do.

Stalin also wanted Finland to cede or lease a number of islands in the Gulf of Finland to the Soviet Union. This would guard the approaches to Leningrad and northern Russia by sea. These the Soviets would arm with cannons and fortifications. In one case, the Soviets asked that the Finns fortify one of the larger islands with the Soviets themselves arming and manning it. Additionally, the Soviets agreed that the Finns could fortify the Åland Islands, which lay in between Sweden and Finland and guarded the Gulf of Bothnia, the northern branch of the Baltic Sea. These islands, which were an autonomous part of Finland (the people there were mostly Swedish-speaking), could not be armed in agreement with Sweden, and so, Finland refused.

In return for these concessions, Stalin offered a piece of land to the Finns that was larger than what he had asked them to give up. Even though

Eastern Karelia was important to the Finns from an emotional point of view, the land there was not strategic in any way, and the Finns refused this offer. So, in the late summer, Stalin and Hitler signed their pact in 1939.

It was clear to everyone that despite the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, war was coming between Hitler and Stalin, as the cartoon in the prior chapter illustrates. And Finland was determined to remain neutral. If it granted Stalin's wishes, not only would it bring their country closer to the Soviet Union, whose system most Finns hated, but it would also anger Hitler, and Finland did much trade with Germany. It was also not completely out of the question that Hitler would invade southern Finland, a contingency that was planned for in the Finnish Army.

The Finns did not trust Stalin at all. They had seen his rise to power, the show trials, the Great Terror, and more. Allowing him to arm island fortresses just off the coast of Finland and to give up the strong fortifications they had built on the Karelian Peninsula opposite Leningrad would put Finland in a weaker position for when Stalin decided to move against Finland. Most Finns supported the government's stance, but there were many that believed Finland was incredibly outmatched by the Red Army and that they had to accept Stalin's offer. Among them was General Mannerheim, the hero of the civil war and now the head of the Finnish Defense Council. Mannerheim's opinion carried some weight, but despite his qualms, the Finns rejected Stalin's demands.



Illustration 4: Situation in fall 1939. Map courtesy genekeyes.com

With the Finnish rejection of his demands and Hitler sidelined for the moment, Stalin ordered his generals to move forward with the invasion of Finland in late November 1939. They, for their part, put together a plan that called for Soviet troops to be marching through Helsinki on December 21st, Stalin's sixtieth birthday.

Balance of Forces

On paper, the Red Army was the largest in the world at that time. Of course, most of it was deployed in eastern Poland and western Russia to defend against Hitler in case he broke the pact. Other massive concentrations were

in Ukraine and in the Far East, as Stalin feared that Japan would attempt an invasion of the Soviet Union there.

There was an approximate total of two million men in the Red Army when the Winter War began. During the course of the short war, the Soviets utilized just under half of these men, as the Finnish defenses were much stouter than predicted. Unfortunately for the Soviets, many of their men had only the most basic of training, though some elite, well-trained, and disciplined troops did take part, especially in the war's second phase.

In addition to their superiority in manpower, the Soviets employed anywhere between 300 to 500 planes in the Finnish war zone through the course of the war. They also deployed some 1,500 to 3,000 tanks of various kinds (light, medium, and heavy) and massive numbers of artillery. The approximate totals are not known due to a lack of transparency from Soviet sources (which, after the war, wished to downplay the numbers of troops used against Finland, for reasons that will become obvious) and the inflated numbers from Finnish sources, which enlarged the numbers of Soviets against them.

To counter those forces, the Finns deployed between 300,000 and 350,000 men, just under 40 tanks, and about 120 aircraft. If you know nothing about the Winter War, you might think you already know the outcome based on these totals alone, but there's more.

The Finns had two advantages that should not be underestimated. Firstly, they were fighting for their country and were up against former colonial oppressors and a system they hated. Secondly, they knew the ground the war would be fought on like the back of their hand.

The Soviets had to deal with a number of other disadvantages as well. One has already been mentioned above—their troops, for the most part, were barely trained recruits. Second, as the Finns were fighting in familiar territory, the Red Army men were not. Third, and this may come as a surprise to many who are familiar with the story of the Red Army in World War II, most Soviet troops were not equipped to fight in the cold winter of Finland. Over a quarter of their estimated over 200,000 casualties came in the form of frostbite.

And lastly, the Red Army was led by men who had very little experience in leading men, and those that did were not willing to gainsay any orders coming from above that they disagreed with. As was mentioned in an earlier chapter, Stalin's purges affected not only his political enemies and

much of Soviet society but the Red Army as well. The officer corps was decimated. Many of those that had been removed from their positions were removed from their lives as well, though some were “rehabilitated” when Hitler invaded the USSR in 1941.

Three of the five marshals of the Soviet Union were removed, as well as 13 of 15 army commanders, 8 of 9 fleet admirals, 50 of 57 corps commanders, and 154 of 186 division commanders. Additionally, the Red Army had a system in which Communist Party officials shadowed higher commanding offices to make sure they were not only following orders and preserving discipline but also acting in the spirit of “Marxism-Leninism,” as the system was then called. These men were not immune either: all 16 army commissars were removed, and 25 of 28 corps commissars were as well. As the purge went on, lower-ranked officers were purged, though the ratios were not as great as those at the top. The Red Army was not what it appeared to be on paper, but it was still a powerful force and equipped with some of the leading technology of the time.

“Refresher Training”

After the Nazi-Soviet Pact and the division of Poland between Hitler and Stalin, the Finns were sure that war would come to them, especially since they were so determined to refuse any further Soviet demands, which came at the end of October/beginning of November 1939. In this late round of talks, the Finns offered to cede the area of Terijoki, a small port area opposite Leningrad, but this was far less than what the Soviets were demanding.

Though the Finns expected the talks to resume, they also did not dismiss the idea that Stalin would attack and try to take what they would not give him, so they began to mobilize their armed forces. However, they did not call it a “mobilization” and did not issue nationwide calls for their troops (many of whom were national guard type cadres who had to leave their “day jobs” and join up with their units) to avoid alarming the Soviets. Instead, the Finns issued local orders to their troops for “refresher training” on the area near the Soviet border. Most of the men knew that this “refresher training” was a call to arms, so it was carried out with the utmost discipline.

At the same time, Finnish troops began to reinforce an already strong line of fortifications near the Soviet border on the Karelian Isthmus near Leningrad. This was to be called the Mannerheim Line, named after the general and head of the Finnish Defense Council. This defensive belt had

been started after the Finnish Civil War in anticipation of the Soviet Union trying to regain territory belonging to the old Russian Empire. Over the years, the line had grown from a series of unreinforced log bunkers to a modern defensive belt with interlocking fields of machine gun positions, reinforced concrete bunkers, an elaborate trench system, miles of barbed wire, and mines. Much of Finland's limited supply of artillery was located on the Mannerheim Line. Unfortunately for the Finns, they suffered from a severe shortage of anti-tank guns, but over the course of the next three months, they would improvise and give the world a new weapon and a new word, more of which we will talk about shortly.

Supplementing the Finnish forces were the Lotta Svärd, a woman's auxiliary group brought into existence during the Finnish Civil War as a part of the White forces. Its name comes from a fictional widow of a Finnish soldier who goes to the front in place of her husband. The Lotta Svärd of the Winter War era did not actually fight on the front lines, though some of the nurses and other female auxiliaries (cooks, mail persons, etc.) did carry sidearms. The "Lottas" also took over the jobs of many of the men who went into the army, much like women did in the US. The symbol of the Lotta Svärd is below and brings up an interesting bit of trivia. It is side by side with the symbol of the Finnish Air Force, as seen on a plane from the time.





As you can see, the Nazis were not the only ones to use the swastika symbol. In fact, the Finns had used it long before Hitler came to power. In Finland, as in many other nations (Japan, for instance), it is a symbol not only of good luck but also of ancient pagan religions. Today, planes of the Finnish Air Force do not use the swastika, but it is used on military insignia and unit flags. Finnish Nazis, on the other hand, do not use the symbol but have appropriated an old Norse rune, which the Finns did not use. The debate over the usage of swastikas is still ongoing in Finland today.

The Mainila Incident

In their wars in Manchuria and China in the 1930s, the Japanese used two “false flag” operations, which had been carried out by their operatives with the aim of making it appear that the Chinese had actually attacked them. However, the world didn’t believe the Japanese.

In 1939, Nazi Germany orchestrated a similar operation on a radio station on the German-Polish border with the aim of making it appear that the Poles had attacked a German radio station in Germany. No one believed the Nazis.

The Soviet Union undertook its own false flag operation to make it appear that the Finns had attacked them. On November 26th, 1939, Soviet guns opened up on their own positions in Mainila, a Russian village located just a few miles north of Leningrad. The Soviets claimed that the artillery fire came from the Finnish side of the border and that between 20 and 25 Soviet soldiers were killed.

Over the next three days, the Finns and the Soviets waged a war of words in the press about the incident, and the Finns proposed a commission from neutral countries to investigate the matter. Of course, the Soviets rejected

this; they had already decided on war, and on November 29th, they formally broke off diplomatic relations with Finland.

Examination of Finnish documents from the time indicate that no Finnish guns were in range of the village; in fact, they had been moved from the border to prevent just such an incident. After the fall of the Soviet Union, files were found that showed without doubt that the incident was developed and carried out by the Soviet Union.

On November 30th, the day after breaking off relations with Finland, the Soviet Union renounced their non-aggression pact with Finland and began their invasion.

The Soviets also had a cadre of Finnish Communists living in their country, refugees from the Finnish Civil War. Led by Otto Kuusinen, they rushed in behind the Soviets and established the Finnish People's Republic in a small Finnish city just across the border. They issued calls for Finnish workers and peasants to rise up against their "capitalist and aristocratic oppressors," but the call went unheeded. Even the leftist Finns hated the Russians and joined the Finnish Army in droves.

Chapter 6 – The Greatest Finn of All Time



In 2004, the Finnish government issued a survey: “Who were the greatest Finns in history?” The winner, by far, was Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim, the man who led Finland through the Winter War and the Continuation War. By the time of the Winter War, Mannerheim was already an admired figure for most Finns; those on the left did not care for him. He had witnessed and been a part of some of the greatest events of Finnish history before and since its independence from Russia.

Mannerheim was born in Askainen, Finland, in June 1867 to an aristocratic family of Swedish-German background. Askainen is on the west coast of Finland, where many ethnic Swedes still live. Like many of his social class, Mannerheim joined the military—in this case, it was the Russian military. He entered the cavalry and served in the elite Chevalier Guard and was part of the honor guard at Nicholas II’s coronation in 1896. He served at Nicholas’s court for some time and became well known to the tsar and his family.

From 1904 to 1905, Mannerheim distinguished himself in the Russo-Japanese War, and he was one of the few Russian officers to come out of that defeat with a better reputation. Between 1906 and 1909, he undertook an arduous journey across Asia to reach China to investigate the Chinese

government's plans for the western part of their nation, near the Russian border. This was in the days before the Trans-Siberian Railway, and Mannerheim did much of his traveling on horseback, foot, and wagon. He met with the Dalai Lama and many other leading figures in the area, and he gained a reputation of being not only a military man but also an adventurer and a diplomat.

When World War I erupted, Mannerheim was made commander of the elite Guards Cavalry Brigade and fought against Austria-Hungary and Romania, where he was cited for bravery. He was then made a division commander in 1915. In the winter of 1917, Mannerheim was on his way back to Finland on leave and found himself in Petrograd (today's Saint Petersburg) when the February Revolution broke out, which ultimately put the Provisional Government of Alexander Kerensky in power and deposed the tsar. When Mannerheim returned to duty, he was promoted to lieutenant general.

When the Bolshevik Revolution broke out that fall, Mannerheim fell under suspicion, as he was a part of the aristocracy. He then chose to retire, and he returned to Finland, but his retirement didn't last long as the Finnish Civil War soon began. As an aristocrat who was in the tsar's bodyguard and his confidante, Mannerheim, of course, joined the White forces and was soon named their commander. During the conflict, White terror squads assassinated Red and leftist agitators and were responsible for the killing of Red prisoners of war. Much of this was laid at Mannerheim's door, as he was, after all, the commander of the White forces, and this dogged him to a degree within Finland until the Winter War. After the civil war ended, some aristocratic Finns wanted to set up a Finnish monarchy with a German prince as king (Germany had an excess of princes, and many Germans had taken the thrones of various European countries throughout the 19th and 20th centuries). These aristocrats, seeing the initial successes of the German Spring Offensive of 1918, believed the Germans would win the war and that a German on the throne of Finland could only strengthen their new country.

Mannerheim, with much more military experience than these men, believed that the Allies would defeat Germany and that the idea, while it appealed to his aristocratic beliefs, was born to fail, which it did with the defeat of Kaiser Wilhelm II. Toward the end of the civil war, Mannerheim approached Great Britain and the United States for recognition of an independent Finland. When Germany was defeated, Prince Friedrich Karl

renounced the Finnish throne, and Mannerheim was made regent until a permanent government could be established. The Western Powers also recognized an independent Finland due to Mannerheim's efforts.

Despite Mannerheim's seemingly inborn belief in the superiority of the aristocracy, he did not push for a Finnish king but rather for a strong executive. He believed that party politics often put the country second and politicians first. The Finns rejected this kind of policy and set up the unicameral parliament that exists today, though it does have a prime minister and presidency, much like France.

In between the civil war and the Winter War, Mannerheim went into retirement, forming and working for a number of charities. He also worked on the board of a large Finnish bank and the now world-famous company Nokia, which then focused largely on lumber and paper.

During the time between the wars, Mannerheim was often approached by rightist parties (some more extreme than others) to help them seize power, where he would be put in charge as a military dictator. Though Mannerheim did support some of the ideas of the rightists (with the exception of the more extreme racial views), he rejected this offer. As Hungary, Romania, and Spain became fascist countries in the 1930s, the Finns rejected extreme right-wing views and made a number of such parties illegal. Any Finnish Communists remaining either lived in hiding or on the other side of the border in the USSR.

In the early 1930s, two of Finland's presidents made promises to Mannerheim that if Finland should go to war, he would be made field marshal and put in charge of the armed forces. Even though Finland was at peace in 1933, Mannerheim was still made field marshal. To this end, he worked toward equipping the Finnish Army and establishing mutual defense pacts or associations, as was mentioned in an earlier chapter.

The pace of Finnish rearmament in the 1930s dismayed Mannerheim, who came to believe more and more that Finland would be at war sometime in the near future. The various Finnish governments in power in the 1930s either had other priorities or believed that rearming would anger the Soviet Union and possibly Germany. At times during the late 1930s, Mannerheim wrote and signed many letters of resignation over the rearmament issue and was about to sign and deliver another when the Winter War broke out.

Personally, Mannerheim was a taciturn man with a regal bearing. He was tall, thin, and powerfully built. He was calm under pressure but had a

temper, which he kept under tight control. Though many Finns with leftist beliefs distrusted him, during the run-up to the Winter War when many Finnish politicians were in favor of leaving left-leaning Finns out of the army or put in jail for being “untrustworthy,” Mannerheim was famously quoted as saying, “We need not ask where a man stood fifteen years ago.” He included left-leaning officers on his staff and supported the left’s inclusion in the struggle to come.

Many outside of Finland might be surprised that the man voted “The Greatest Finn of All Time” could not really speak Finnish. This was not uncommon, especially among those of Swedish heritage from the west of the country. Besides that, Finnish is a notoriously difficult language to learn. Mannerheim had to rely on a translator to get by until he was in his fifties. He spoke Swedish at home, German and Russian fluently, English well enough, and some French. Some Finns distrusted Mannerheim because of this and because he was in the Imperial Russian Army before Finnish independence. Sometimes, Mannerheim would sign official documents “Kustaa,” the Finnish form of Karl, to overcome this prejudice. More often, though, he signed “C. G. Mannerheim,” as he hated the name “Emil,” or just “Mannerheim.” By the end of the Winter War, no one questioned his loyalty to Finland.

In the negotiations with the Soviet Union before the war, Mannerheim supported the idea of leasing those islands the Soviets requested and giving up some territory on the Karelian Isthmus in return for territory farther north. The field marshal believed that in the face of the overwhelming numbers of the Red Army and the lack of preparedness of the Finnish armed forces, it was only a matter of time before Stalin got what he wanted anyway. However, Mannerheim, while his opinion was important, was not the government, and the Finns, as we have seen, rejected all Soviet “offers.” Despite his doubts, when war came, Mannerheim dedicated himself to the cause, and he came to epitomize the Finnish spirit of *sisu*, which Finlandia University aptly defines as “strength of will, determination, perseverance, and acting rationally in the face of adversity.”

Chapter 7 – Hell in the Snow



When people think of the Winter War, the image above is likely what they picture in their minds. Finns, perfectly at home in the forests and cold, dressed in white, silently skiing around, through, between, and among terrified Russians, who died by the hundreds. This is absolutely true, but while that did happen, most of the heaviest fighting took place along the static Mannerheim Line that had been set up by the Finns on the Karelian Isthmus northeast of Leningrad in the years before the war. The isthmus was a natural bridge between the Gulf of Finland and Lake Ladoga, meaning there was very little room to maneuver. This allowed the Finns to concentrate their fewer numbers in one specific spot, where the Russians battered themselves to pieces for months on the Finns' unyielding defenses. North of the Karelian Isthmus, Finland is a land of seemingly endless forests and lakes, even to this day. In the 1930s, very few roads existed in these forests, and those that did were mostly dirt tracks, mostly unknown to the Russians but well known to the Finns. It was there that the Finns set loose the majority of their ski-troops against the Red Army.

Like the Spanish Civil War that had begun in 1936, the Winter War was a foreshadowing of the worldwide conflict that was to come, and it began with what became a common occurrence in 1939 through 1945: the bombing of civilian targets. On the morning of November 30th, 1939, the

Red Air Force bombed Finland's capital, Helsinki. The bombing did significant damage, killed 97 people, and wounded almost 300.

When this happened, the world was a different place than what it would be just a few months later, and the Soviets came under widespread criticism for bombing civilians. US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt asked the Soviets to refrain from bombing civilians and was told by Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov that the USSR was only bombing airfields. Others also criticized the bombing, to which Molotov replied that the Soviets were only dropping food to "starving Finns." The incendiary bombs that the Soviets dropped did have a basketlike look to them, and the Finns, who are famous for their sardonic humor, dubbed the bombs as "Molotov bread baskets."

Of course, we all recognize the name "Molotov." Vyacheslav Molotov was the Soviet foreign minister from 1939 to 1949. Winston Churchill, famous for his colorful descriptions of people, later described him thus: "I have never known a human being who more perfectly represented the modern conception of a robot." This is likely how Molotov survived being Stalin's right-hand man for decades.

To the Finns, Molotov and Stalin were the personifications of evil, and they decided to have a little fun at Molotov's expense. The Finns did not have nearly enough anti-tank weapons when the Soviets attacked, and so, they improvised. They developed what they said was "a drink to go with his food parcels." You guessed it: the famous "Molotov cocktail." It didn't get that name by accident.



The Molotov cocktail is a nasty piece of business, and it can be quite effective against vehicles and concrete fortifications—if you can get close enough. This type of homemade bomb was used in the Spanish Civil War and other smaller conflicts before the Winter War, but it was the Finns, with their jab at the Soviet foreign minister, that made them famous.

The Finns began by using gasoline or kerosene in a large milk or vodka bottle with a rag soaked in kerosene (gasoline burns too fast). Very shortly, the use of these bombs became widespread, and their effectiveness was noticed. The Finnish alcohol monopoly Alko began using vodka bottles to produce ready-made bombs, and a variety of mixtures were used, such as kerosene, tar, and potassium chlorate, or other flammable and sticky materials. Alko supplied long storm proof fuses and matches along with their “cocktails.” Individual soldiers experimented with creating these cocktails themselves as well.

To use the cocktail, you have to be within throwing distance. That takes a lot of courage when faced with waves of Soviet tanks, and for sure, many Finns died trying to use their bombs. Many sources and interviews from both sides testify to the bravery of the Finns, but they did not simply stand up and run at the Soviet machines. They made use of other tools and tactics too.

As you can imagine, Finland is usually covered in snow in the winter. The Finnish people donated white linens, sheets, and blankets to the army, which made white coveralls for its infantry, and soon, the Finnish soldiers blended into the background, making it a bit easier to get closer to the Soviet tanks and guns. Of course, the ski troops used the cocktails too, but using them on skis didn't take place all that often as it took a lot of skill. As a side note, one would think that the Red Army would have used snowsuits too, but it seems that this did not occur to them at first, probably because they expected a swift victory. However, after a few weeks and the reorganization of their forces, more Soviets began to clothe themselves in white.

The cocktails could be used on troops as well, but troops could more easily get out of the way and roll in the snow to put the fire out. Men in tanks, especially tanks that were bogged down in snow and mud from the forest, had nowhere to go. The Finns were taught to aim for the ventilation and observation slits of the tank, which would allow them to cook the men inside, a horrifying death that terrified the Soviet men and sapped morale.

The main focus of the Soviet attack came on the Karelian Isthmus, which was the focus of Soviet demands, as they sought a buffer zone for Leningrad. It was there that the Finns had established the Mannerheim Line, which, in the 1930s, had been strengthened in most places by reinforced concrete bunkers.

On the Mannerheim Line, the Finns enjoyed a number of advantages for a time. Firstly, the Soviets had limited space to maneuver. They essentially tried to overwhelm the Finns with their numbers, but this did not work since the limited space concentrated the strength of the Finnish units there. Additionally, the Finns had to make the best use of their limited artillery. They had approximately only 36 guns per division, and most of these were from pre-1918, but the Finns had ample time before the war started to “zero in” each gun on the line to pre-set target areas. By using an advance force ahead of the line, the Finns learned where the Soviets had concentrated most of their troops and launched effective artillery barrages.

The other advantages the Finns had were the snow, the lack of roads, and the short hours of the northern winter, which allowed the Finns to get closer to the tanks than they might have in full sunlight.

The Mannerheim Line itself was placed anywhere between twenty and thirty miles from the border. The Soviets reached the line about a week after the war began and concentrated their first attacks on the eastern part of the isthmus, along the coast of Lake Ladoga and the city of Taipale.

Over the next week, the Soviets began to realize that their idea of marching into Helsinki within days was not going to happen. At the Battle of Taipale, which lasted from December 6th to December 27th, the Soviets used two tactics they expected to work, as they had previously worked during the Russian Civil War and their brief conflict with the Japanese in Mongolia in 1938. The first was simply to use wave after wave of men. At Taipale, the Finns had the advantage of higher ground and an unobstructed view of the waves of Soviet troops.

Additionally, for much of the war, the Soviets tried to spread their tanks far apart, which had proved useful in their fight in Mongolia against the Japanese. In Finland, though, that didn't work so well. Isolated in the snow, and with many of them bogged down (the Soviets had not yet completely developed the idea of wider tanks and tracks that allow weight to be more equitably dispersed), the Finns with their white suits and Molotov cocktails descended on them.

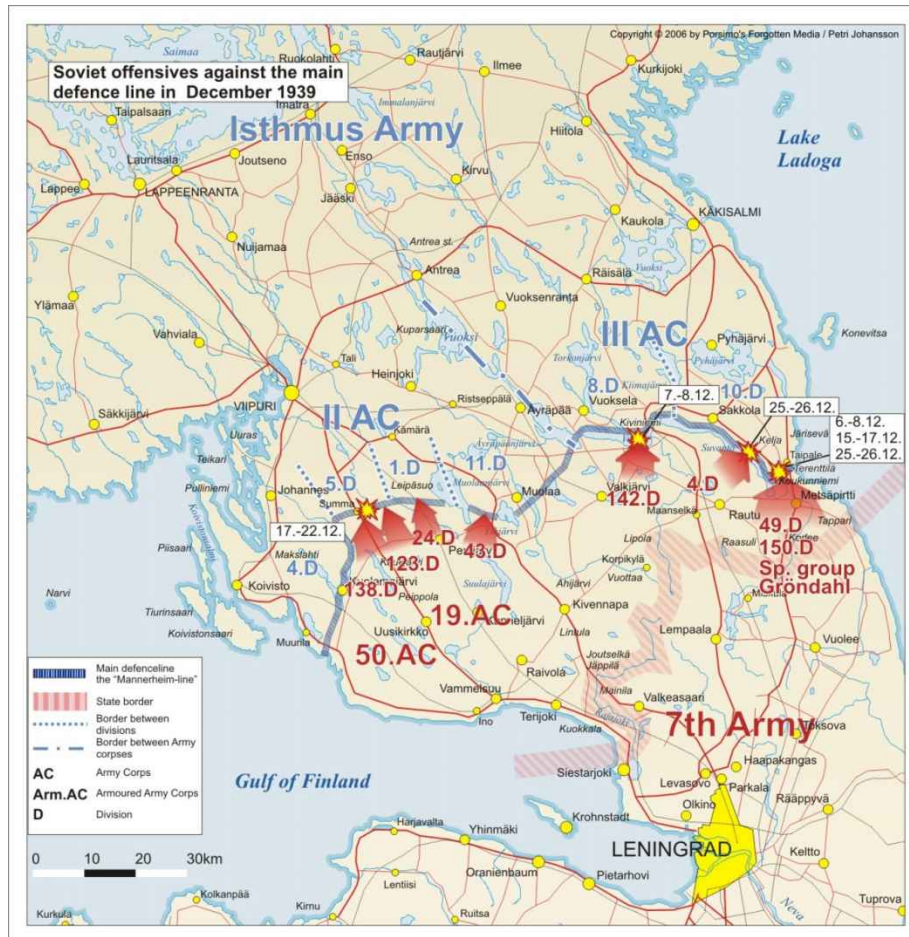


Illustration 5: The Soviet attacks along the Karelian Isthmus/Mannerheim Line, December 1939

The Soviets attempted attack after attack at Taipale, and none of them succeeded in moving the Finns at all. Thousands of Soviets died, and dozens of Red Army tanks were destroyed.

That winter was one of the coldest on record, hitting a low of -45°F on January 16th, 1940. The Finns were made of flesh and blood just like the Soviets, but they were better prepared for the winter conditions than their enemies. All of Finland is in the north, and while many Soviet soldiers were intimately familiar with the cold, many of them were from southern areas in the USSR. On top of that, Soviet officers were loath to request additional gear: to do so might indicate that one did not believe that Stalin had adequately prepared his men. In the Soviet Union of the 1930s, any criticism, implied or otherwise, was taken as a criticism of the system and its head. To complain was to risk your life.

North of the Mannerheim Line

Over 200 miles to the north, a Soviet division numbering about 20,000 men launched an attack near the town of Tolvajärvi. Here, the Finns had one regiment and a number of smaller independent battalions numbering approximately 4,000 men. It was at Tolvajärvi that the legends of Finland's resistance and of the ski-troops were born.



Commanding the Finns at Tolvajärvi was Colonel Paavo Talvela (pictured below), a veteran of the Finnish Jäger battalion that had fought in World War I and the Finnish Civil War.

At Tolvajärvi and elsewhere in the north, the Finns developed a tactic that can be likened to what some predators do to larger schools of fish or herds of antelope or zebra on the African plains. Using their mobility, the Finns would concentrate their forces to achieve local superiority and cut off Soviet units from their comrades. During the night and in the forests and hills of Finland, this was easy to do (relatively speaking). The Soviets would gather themselves much like the US pioneers circled their wagons on the Great Plains when under attack by Native American warriors. The Finns called these formations *mottis*, or “pockets.” They would destroy these *mottis* and move on in concert with other units as they moved in the darkness. Many of the men in the *mottis* were not only fighting the Finns but the cold weather as well. Despite orders, fires were lit, making the Soviets easier to spot and harder for the men inside the encampment to see out.

At Tolvajärvi, the Finns killed an estimated 4,000 to 5,000 Soviets, wounded another 5,000, destroyed and disabled almost 60 Soviet tanks and armored vehicles, and destroyed or captured at least 30 Soviet cannons. The original Soviet division and a reinforcement division were mauled, all at a loss of just over 100 Finns killed in action, 250 wounded, and 150 captured. The victory resulted in Colonel Talvela's promotion to major general and buoyed the spirits of other Finnish soldiers. The civilians at home, many of whom had family on the front lines, also had their spirits lifted by the victory at Tolvajärvi, which they needed. As if the war was not bad enough, the government had announced a ban on dancing and similar gatherings for the duration of the war—and this stayed in effect throughout World War II. The Finns were successful in blunting the Soviet offensive in the north and inflicting massive casualties on the Red Army, but Stalin knew he could sustain greater losses before it made a dent in his army. Eventually, the Finns would wear down, but before they did, they were going to make the Soviets pay for every inch of ground they took.

All throughout Eastern Karelia, Finnish families packed up what they could on horse-drawn sleighs, carts, and wagons. Sometimes they had to flee at a moment's notice, seeing the fires of burning villages on the horizon and the refugees pouring into their town with word that the "Ivans" were coming. As the refugees moved westward toward bigger towns or other villages for safety, Finnish border guards and militiamen attempted to hold the Soviets back until proper reinforcements arrived.

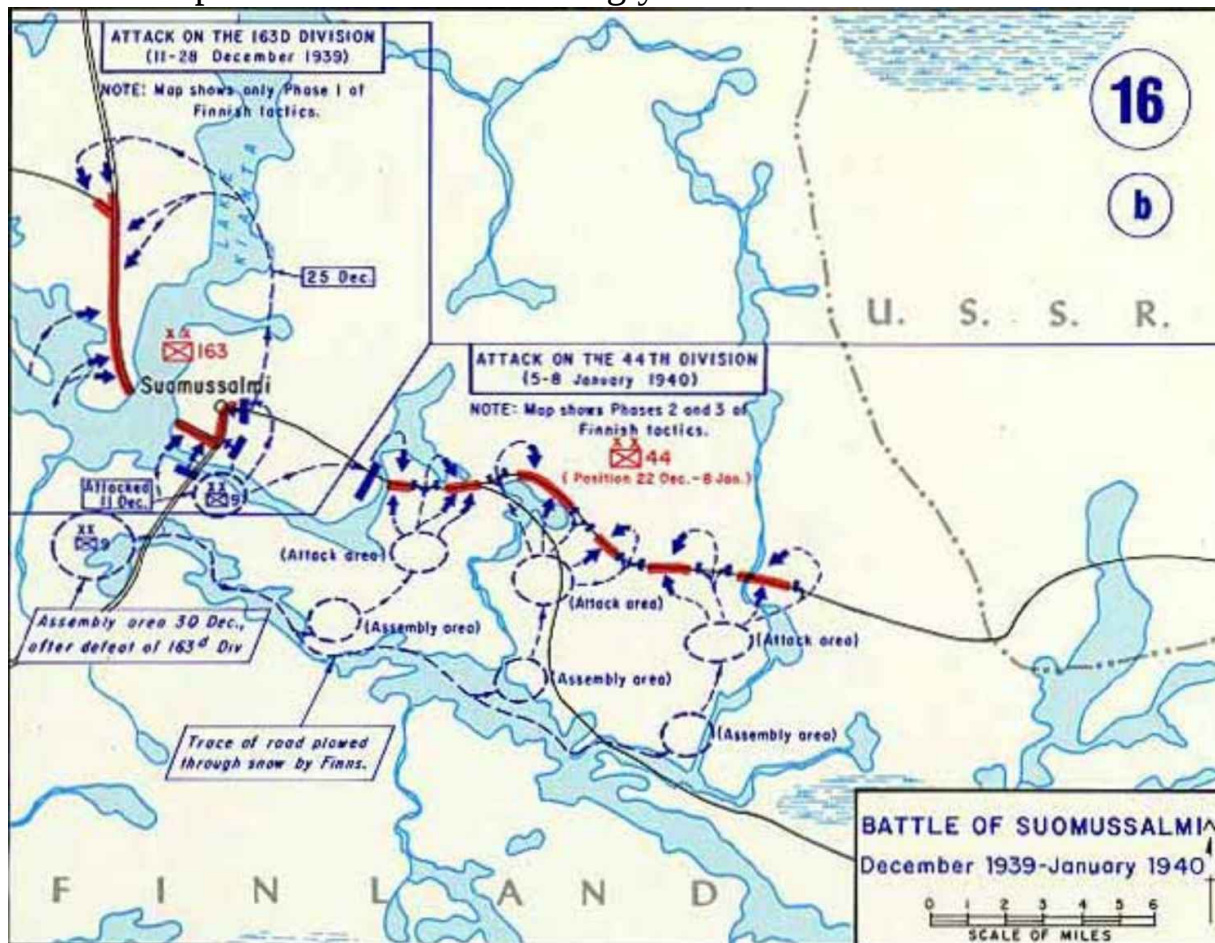
In the far north of Finland, the Arctic Ocean port of Petsamo, which was the nation's only port on that ocean, fell to the Soviets after a brief fight, but though they attempted to push farther south, the Soviets at Petsamo could make no further progress, and the front lines in that area remained static to the end of the war.

Elsewhere, the Finns fell back, luring the Soviets deeper and deeper into the dark, cold forests. In the region of Suomussalmi, the Finns fought the battle that has, since the time of the war, been held up by generations of Finns as the greatest victory of the Winter War.

The Soviet goal in the area was to reach the city of Oulu and control the roads around it. Doing so would cut Finland in half and deal a severe blow to the Finns, who might be forced to concede defeat if their country was divided. The Soviet 163rd Rifle Division moved into the area on the first day of the war, November 30th.

On that first day and for about a week thereafter, the Finns only had one battalion of men in the area, in the village of Raate located along the main east-west road (really a wide dirt track, like many of the roads in the area), which wended its way through heavy forests with lakes on either side. As you will see in the following maps, and if you look at a map of Finland in general, lakes lay all over the country, making travel of the countryside very difficult. This also allowed the Finns to bottle up the Soviets in small contained areas.

The Reds advanced on Suomussalmi on December 7th, 1939, and took the town, which was nothing but a pile of smoldering ruins as the Finns had set it on fire to deny the Soviets shelter from the cold. Suomussalmi lies on the banks of Kiantijärvi (Lake Kianti), a large body of water. The Finns retreated to the other side of the lake to watch what the Soviets would do next and to plan their tactics accordingly.



In the left-hand corner of the map above, you can see that the Soviets' next move was an attempt to flank the Finnish positions across from

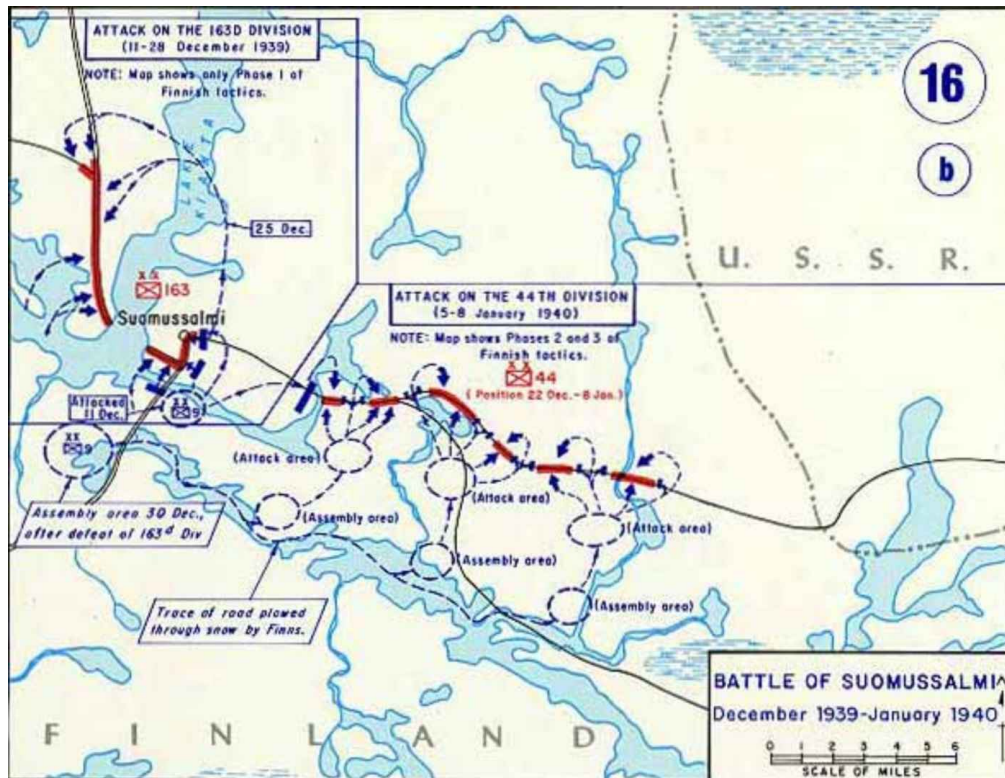
Suomussalmi. Though faced with only part of a battalion, this attempt failed.

Another veteran of Finland's World War I volunteers, Colonel Hjalmar Siilasvuo, arrived on December 9th and took command of the Finnish forces in the area. The first thing he did was order an attack on Suomussalmi, which was repulsed with heavy losses. In assaulting prepared positions, which the Soviets had been working on since they first arrived, the Finns were at a disadvantage. The Soviets had more heavy, medium, and light machine guns, cannons, and armored vehicles.

Though the Finns could not take back the town, they did surround it and kept the Soviets bottled up within. The Soviets tried to break the encirclement a number of times, especially on Christmas Eve, but were unsuccessful. By the 27th, however, the Finns had received reinforcements, two highly trained Jäger regiments, and retook Suomussalmi.

Not all of the Soviets within the town were killed or captured, and the ones that managed to flee escaped in panic down the Raate Road toward the Soviet border. Along the road, the panicking Red forces were met by Soviet reinforcements from the 44th Rifle Division moving into the area. The result was a huge traffic jam. Units became entangled, discipline fell apart and was put back together using harsh methods, and many Soviets simply fled into the forests, where most of them froze to death or were hunted down by the Finns, who began to move into the forests on both sides of the road like wolves just outside the warmth of a fire.

Over the course of the next four days, the Finns moved and skied circles around the "Ivans," cutting off units from one another and wiping them out one by one. Many of these attacks came at night, making them even more terrifying for the men of the Red Army. Oftentimes, they would hear a battle begin just down the line from them in the darkness. The forests muffled or exaggerated sound depending on the area's topography. Sometimes, the battle sounded far away, and the next thing they knew, the Soviets had units of Finns ripping right through them. Sometimes, the battles took place quite a ways off but sounded as if it was next door, and the panicked screams of their comrades set the rest of the Soviets in the area on edge.



By January 8th, 1940, the Finns had destroyed or captured all of the Soviets in the area, along with much materiel, which was badly needed: 43 tanks, over 70 field guns, and 29 of the ever-important anti-tank guns, along with trucks, horses, rifles, machine guns, and ammunition.

All along the central and northern fronts of the war, the Finns inflicted heavy losses on the Russians using guerrilla tactics. In hundreds of skirmishes, large and small, the Finns showed what a determined and skilled army could do when fighting for their homeland.

As you read at the start of this book, Winston Churchill was in awe of the Finns, as were many others around the world. Nations, especially France and Britain, had talked about aiding the Finns against the Soviets. In the end, this amounted to naught, but just the idea of France and Britain getting involved was enough to give Stalin pause when the Finns sent a message that they were willing to negotiate.



Illustration 6: In this US cartoon, Uncle Sam and the other great “neutral” powers discuss sending weapons to the Finns.

Though the Finns were admired for their stand against the Russians, in the end, they did not receive the aid they needed to continue the war successfully. Time, distance, international relations, and indecision all got in the way. Some 8,000 Swedes did volunteer and fight in Finland, as did several hundred Norwegians, and the Swedes did manage to secretly send some heavy weapons, but significant aid was lacking for the Finns.

The Soviets ended their push against the Mannerheim Line in late December. Here, the Finns had managed to hold back the main Soviet advance and had even attempted to recapture Viipuri, an attack that failed at high costs to both sides. However, as the fighting along the Mannerheim Line went into a sort of semi-lull, to the north, on the northern side of Lake Ladoga, the Soviets continued to push.

The initial Soviet attacks in the area had caught Mannerheim by surprise. He expected the bulk of the Soviet forces to move within the isthmus, but the Soviets were attempting a flanking maneuver to the north in the hopes of breaking through the Finnish lines and approaching the Mannerheim Line from the rear, capturing the Finns there in a vice and thus ending the war.

After the initial Soviet advance into Finnish territory, Mannerheim was forced to take reserves from the Mannerheim Line and move them northward to the area of the Kollaa River. Here, as on the isthmus, the Finns and Soviets engaged in a war of attrition. In fact, the Battle of Kollaa lasted from the beginning of the war in December until its end in the middle of March.

Like the Battle of Suomussalmi, the Battle of Kollaa became a rallying point for the Finns. When Mannerheim radioed the local commander, a legendary figure among the Finns named Aarne Juutilainen, asking him, “Can Kollaa hold?” Juutilainen signaled back, “Kollaa will hold—unless we’re ordered to run.” That phrase, “Kollaa will hold,” became a catchphrase in WWII-Finland, and one can still hear it occasionally when a person is faced with a difficult situation. Juutilainen was one of the great figures of the war and was nicknamed “The Terror of Morocco,” for he had served there in the French Foreign Legion. He was also known for his wild hard-drinking parties, as well as his leadership.

One of the men who attended Juutilainen’s parties at least once is probably the most well-known Finn of the Winter War outside of Finland. That man is Simo Häyhä, dubbed “The White Death.” Häyhä once took a captured Soviet soldier to one of Juutilainen’s parties and then turned him loose to return to Soviet lines—the man cried and literally begged to stay with the Finns.

Häyhä’s kill count, estimated at over 500, is disputed by some. His wartime diary, which was not released until after his death in 2002, notches over 500, and his chaplain, who made notes during the war, claimed Häyhä shot 536 Red Army soldiers. What is known as an absolute certainty is that Häyhä became a celebrity during the war in Finland and that the Soviets put a bounty on his head.

Even more amazing than Häyhä’s kill count is how he did it without a scope. He believed that a scope forced a sniper to rise up to see the enemy, potentially giving his position away. The glint off a scope could do the same. Häyhä used a Russian-designed Finnish-made variant of the Mosin-Nagant rifle and the outstanding Finnish submachine gun, the Suomi KP/-31. He is alleged to have killed an equal number of Reds with the machine gun as with the sniper rifle.



Illustration 7: Häyhä during the war

It was also to Häyhä's advantage that he was small. He stood at barely five feet tall. To further reduce his chances of being seen, Häyhä is said to have put snow in his mouth to cool his breath and reduce the mist it made when he exhaled, and, of course, he wore the famous white camouflage. Unfortunately for Häyhä, he was hit on the left side of his face by an explosive bullet toward the end of the war, permanently disfiguring him. It was an incident that took him years to recover from. For most of his life, he kept his war experience quiet, a quality appreciated by the Finns, who are known for being rather taciturn. Häyhä spent the rest of his life as a professional hunter and dog breeder, sometimes even leading hunts for Finland's elite.

However, despite the heroics of men like Häyhä, Juutilainen, Talvela, Siilasvuo, and countless others, as well as the adroit leadership of Mannerheim, in the end, many, if not most, Finns knew the end was inevitable. The Soviet numbers were just too great. The question was, could the Finns inflict enough damage on the Reds to make them think twice

about pushing on to take the rest of the country? And would the international situation lend itself to the Finnish cause?

These questions became ever more urgent in February on the Karelian Isthmus. During the latter part of January and the beginning of February, the Soviets paused and regrouped. Not only did they reorganize and reinforce their units, but they also resupplied them with better gear. First and foremost, they gave their front-line troops snowsuits so they wouldn't stand out as such easy targets for the Finns. They also supplied great quantities of cold-weather gear. Much as the Germans would in 1941, the Soviets had originally sent their men into battle with the wrong clothing while expecting a rapid victory. That had now changed.

Additionally, troops were taken out of the line and retrained. Some of them became ski-troops, and more elite and practiced units of all types were brought in from around the USSR. Most important of all, the Soviets changed commanders on the Karelian Isthmus. The original commander, Kirill Meretskov, was removed from command. At the start of World War II, he was arrested and held by the secret police for two months but "redeemed" himself during the war and ended it as a marshal of the Soviet Union.

Replacing Meretskov was Semyon Timoshenko, who had fought in World War I and the Russian Civil War and was a personal friend of Stalin's, which helped him survive the Great Purge and placed him among the highest-ranking Soviet commanders. Under Timoshenko, the Soviets on the Karelian Isthmus would push forward, exhausting the Finns and causing the Mannerheim Line to crack in the latter part of February 1939.

Conclusion: Defeat but Not defeated

In late January, the Soviets actually signaled a willingness to negotiate with the Finns. The war was not going well, and Stalin was beginning to become more and more concerned about Hitler. Stalin would need the nearly three-quarters of a million men involved in Finland if Hitler decided to invade the USSR. They also returned the Finnish Communists to the Soviet Union, where, miraculously, Otto Kuusinen survived into old age.

Though the Finns were holding their own by this point, Mannerheim and others realized that without massive international intervention, which seemed less likely every day, their cause would eventually be lost. Why not negotiate with the Soviets before the good weather and long days made Soviet airpower more effective? Aside from that, though the Finns in the north were enjoying successes, many Soviet *mottis* (the Finnish word for the encircled strongholds they had penned the Russians into) were still standing firm. However, they were unable to break out and advance—or retreat. Instead, they kept the Finns busy, which took a toll on Finland's limited manpower.

Throughout late January, the Finnish leadership debated on if, how, and when to approach the Soviets. At the time, the Finnish Army was holding the Soviets back, but on February 1st, the Soviets launched a massive assault on the Mannerheim Line. Timoshenko and the new cadre of officers that had been brought in showed an ability that their predecessors did not, as they were able to launch the blitzkrieg tactics that the Germans had used in Poland in 1939.

Over the course of the next ten days, the Red Army launched coordinated assaults on the Mannerheim Line, and on February 11th, they broke through at the town of Summa. The break in the line at Summa caused the Finns all along the line to retreat to another less formidable line of defense that had been prepared at the start of the war.

Exhaustion, dwindling supplies, lack of anti-tank guns on a meaningful scale, and reduced manpower began to take a toll on the Finns, despite their continued dogged resistance. Over the course of the next two weeks, the Soviets launched attack after attack, forcing the Finns back on ever-weakening lines of defense.

While this assault went on, the Finns responded to Stalin's call to negotiate. In the end, though, it wasn't really a negotiation, rather the Finns receiving

a set of demands from the Russians, which happened on February 23rd. The Soviets demanded what they had originally demanded plus some additional requests: more islands in the Gulf of Bothnia, the entire Karelian Isthmus, and the north shore of Lake Ladoga. In return, Stalin would return Petsamo, Finland's only ice-free port on the Arctic Ocean, although they were not allowed to station naval vessels there.

In actuality, given Stalin's personality and the power of the Soviet forces, the terms were rather generous, relatively speaking. In all likelihood, he was nervous about what the British and French might do, and he wanted the Winter War to end quickly because of his fears of Hitler invading.

On March 12th, the Finns sent a delegation to Moscow and signed the terms of the cease-fire as laid out by Stalin and Molotov. The Winter War, called *Talvisota* in Finnish, ended on March 13th, 1940.

The Finns had suffered almost 26,000 casualties. They lost about 10 percent of their territory and had to absorb 400,000 refugees from the areas now in the Soviet Union (and still part of Russia today). But it could have been much, much worse, and most Finns knew it. The bravery and skill of the Finnish troops, the spirit of *sisu* shown by the Lotta Svärd and every Finn, and the leadership of Marshal Mannerheim had saved Finland from complete disaster.

On the world stage, the Soviets were greatly embarrassed by their performance in the Winter War. Most historians believe that Hitler, who was already leaning toward an invasion of the USSR, was encouraged by what he saw in Finland. However, Hitler and others should have looked a bit deeper, because, at the end of the war, the Soviets had shown themselves able to conduct a modern offensive after learning and regrouping. Though the Germans would punish the Soviets in their invasion of the USSR in 1941, this was due to the time it took for the Soviets to recover from the purges of the 1930s and to absorb the lessons of Finland and the early part of World War II. Once they regrouped, doing so on a large-scale, they became even better at the blitzkrieg than the Germans had been.

For Finland, Hitler's invasion of the USSR presented them with an opportunity to regain lost land. So, in 1941, they joined up with Hitler. They did not form an anti-Semitic fascist government, and though Hitler and his SS chief Henrich Himmler put pressure on Finland to turn over their Jews to Germany, aside from one embarrassing and tragic incident, the Jewish community in Finland remained safe and even served in the Finnish Army.

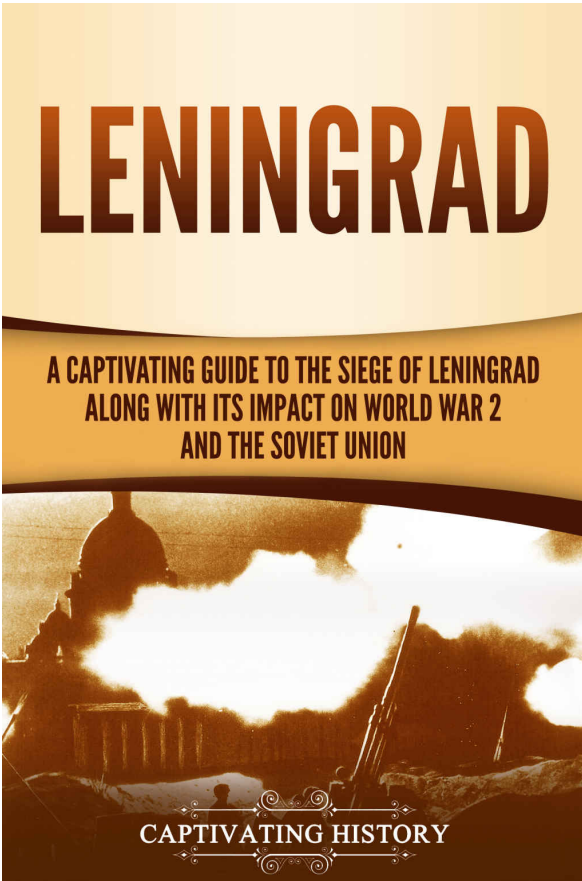
The Finns joined with Hitler, and Mannerheim made it clear that his forces would not advance farther than the original lines of Finland's pre-Winter War borders. Though Hitler tried in almost every way to get the Finns to aid Germany's siege of Leningrad, they would not. The Continuation War, known as *Jaktosota* in Finnish, would remain a largely static war. The Finns regained what had been lost in the Winter War plus some small parts of Soviet Karelia, in which many ethnic Finns lived.

However, as the tides turned against Hitler, it turned against Finland too. Stalin gave Finland an ultimatum that they were to either throw out or disarm the Germans and give up what they had gained from 1941 to 1944 or face complete invasion. Wisely, the Finns followed the Soviet's demands, and the Germans surprisingly left without much of an argument. This likely saved Finland from the fate of Germany's eastern European allies of Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary, all of which the Soviet Union took over and made puppet states.

For his part, Marshal Mannerheim was credited with a victory of sorts in the Winter War, as he kept Finland safe from the USSR and Germany (a rock and a hard place if there ever was one), and the war ended with him being regarded as a greater hero than he had been before. He died in 1951 of an ulcer. Interestingly enough, the only recording of Hitler in a conversation is a secret recording a Finnish sound engineer made during his meeting with Mannerheim in 1942, in which Hitler admits attacking the USSR was likely a mistake. This is perhaps the biggest understatement of all time.

Part 3: Leningrad

A Captivating Guide to the Siege of Leningrad and Its Impact on World War 2 and the Soviet Union



roduction

From the early fall of 1941 until the winter of 1944, the Soviet city of Leningrad (today's St. Petersburg) was almost completely surrounded by the forces of Nazi Germany and Finland. Though the siege lasted just under 900 days, to the citizens of the Soviet Union (and Russia today), this event is referred to as the "900-Day Siege."

In those 900 Days, the losses sustained by the Soviet Union were greater than the losses of Great Britain (est. 450,000) and the United States (est. 415,000) combined for the *entire* duration of the war. The losses in Leningrad (both civilian and military) amounted to over one million deaths, according to American military historian David Glantz. Other estimates reach the same general conclusion.

These one million victims of the Nazi siege did not only fall to Nazi bullets, bombs, and shells. The men, women, and children of Leningrad died in a variety of other ways as well, most of them exceedingly unpleasant, such as disease, starvation, and suicide. And, despite the propaganda from both sides, Russians are just as susceptible to cold weather as anyone else, especially when fuel runs out and there is not enough adequate clothing to go around.

When the war began, Leningrad, in many ways, was the pride of the Soviet Union, just as it had been before the Bolshevik Revolution. It was easily the most beautiful city in the country: its baroque buildings and wide promenades earned it the name the "Venice of the North" for its beauty and many canals. The citizens of Petrograd (changed from St. Petersburg during WWI for being "too German") and Leningrad were rightly proud of their beautiful city, which was the home to many of the palaces of the tsars and the leading museums of the nation.

Leningrad was also the seedbed of Soviet communism. It was in Leningrad that the Bolshevik Revolution took place, and while the capital of the country was moved to Moscow shortly thereafter (mainly for reasons of safety, as it was far from the borders of the nation), many Leningraders considered their city as the spiritual/ideological capital of their country.

For all of these reasons and more, Adolf Hitler was determined to crush the city and not only defeat the forces and people within it but also exterminate all of them and level the city to the ground.

apter 1 – Before the Siege

In 1703, Tsar Peter the Great seized control of the area where St. Petersburg now stands after a long war with then-powerful Sweden. The ground on which the future city would stand was on the Neva River, which led directly to the Baltic Sea. This would give Peter his long-dreamed-of practical northern port, for the other main western Russian port, Arkhangelsk, was frequently icebound and located hundreds of miles from any important commercial sea lanes.

Peter, who spent a lot of time in Western Europe learning new ways of business, seafaring, engineering, and technology, was determined to build a new city in this location. He would call it his “Window on the West.” Though Peter wanted his new city to be a cultural and commercial center, he was also quite aware that its location and his intended purposes for the city would make it a prime target for Russia’s enemies, of which there were many. Thus, the first building to begin construction in St. Petersburg was the St. Peter and Paul Fortress, a star-shaped fortress that sat on an island on a branch of the Neva River. Today, the fortress is a museum, but when it was built, it was a sign of Russia’s power to arriving ships. During the period of the Bolshevik Revolution, it was a sign of dread, as it served as a prison and execution site.

Over the course of the next few years, Peter invited Italian and French architects and city-planners (then a relatively new field) to Russia to help him build his dream city. Ornate palazzos and avenues filled the city, but many of its structures were still constructed from wood. As a result, fires frequently broke out in the 1830s. This gave Peter and his designers a chance to design and improve the city’s plans, grids, and canals, and places such as Palace Square slowly grew into monumental neoclassical spaces. The Winter Palace, known to many people from the time of the Bolshevik Revolution, was designed in the baroque style.

Though the city became a monument to the power of Russia and its ruling family, the Romanovs, it was built on the backs, and with the lives, of tens of thousands of workers, most of whom were serfs from the countryside who were impressed into duty. Though serfdom had many layers in Russia, it is easiest to think of these people simply as slaves—the vast majority had no rights whatsoever, and for centuries, they were bought and sold like cattle. In the years it took to construct St. Petersburg, it’s estimated that

approximately 40,000 to 100,000 serfs died. Exhaustion, sickness, cold, and accidents were the main causes of death.

Over the years, St. Petersburg became home to some of the world's most famous buildings. The Winter Palace has already been mentioned. Others included the famed Hermitage Museum and Theater, the General Staff Building, the Moscow Triumphal Gate (a monument to Russia's victory over Napoleon Bonaparte), the many palaces and mansions of the royal family, the blue-domed Trinity Cathedral, and the Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ.

The city was the capital of Russia from 1713 to 1918 when Vladimir Lenin moved it back to Moscow. The city's beauty and location became famous throughout Russia, and consequently, many of Russia's leading artists, writers, and composers either moved or were born there. The composers Shostakovich and Borodin called the city home. Peter Carl Fabergé, the famed jeweler, did as well. Perhaps the most famous Russian writer of them all, Leo Tolstoy, was from St. Petersburg.

Though Russian history is full of peasant uprisings, it was not until the late 19th and early 20th centuries that the possibility of revolution became truly real. The economic and political unfairness of the tsarist system, along with the rise of a growing middle class that was seen as exploiting the serfs, peasants, and workers of Russia hand in hand with the aristocracy, gave rise to many factions, some moderate, some extreme. However, they all called for the serious modification or elimination of the tsarist system.

One of these was the Bolshevik faction of the Marxist Russian Social Democratic Labour Party—in other words, the Communists. This is not the place for the history of the rise of communism, but suffice it to say that the Bolsheviks and others like them called for the elimination of private property and the means of industrial and agricultural production, as well as the establishment of a classless state.

Making things worse in Russia were its mounting losses in World War One against Germany and Austria-Hungary. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers mutinied and either went home or joined the ranks of the revolutionaries.

In October 1917, the Bolsheviks took control of St. Petersburg, storming the Winter Palace and other important buildings. The tsar, who had already abdicated months earlier, giving power to a less radical band of

revolutionaries, was captured and later executed by the Bolsheviks. After this, a civil war began, which lasted four years and killed millions.

Following the Bolshevik Revolution and the Red (Bolshevik) victory in the Russian Civil War, the capital was moved back to Moscow. With the death of Lenin in 1924, St. Petersburg (whose name had been changed to Petrograd to make it sound “less German” during WWI) was renamed once again, this time in honor of the Bolshevik leader, Vladimir Lenin.

Though Leningrad was no longer the capital, it was still the artistic, literary, and musical capital of Russia in many ways, and it was the home of the Bolshevik Revolution. For all of these reasons and more, the city became the special target of Adolf Hitler in his plans to destroy the Soviet Union.



Illustration 1: Location of St. Petersburg/Leningrad

apter 2 – Horror Approaches

It almost goes without saying, but it bears repeating, that Adolf Hitler was an extreme nationalist. He was not alone in this, even before the birth of the Nazi Party. Since the late 19th century, a small but growing and influential group of people in Germany had been espousing the idea that Germans (including the Germanic peoples of Northern Europe) were the superior or “master” race of the world.

With the disaster that fell upon Germany in WWI and the years after, a feeling of resentment grew over having seemingly not been defeated militarily (however, they were about to be when peace was declared) and being made to swallow unfair peace terms in the Treaty of Versailles. This feeling of resentment was backed up by the notion that enemies from within (primarily Jews and communists) reinforced the idea among many that the world was against Germany because others were envious and threatened by its superior people.

Anti-Semitism had been a factor in Germany for centuries, for reasons too long to explain in this book. Surprisingly, however, German anti-Semitism was much less virulent and obvious than in many other European countries, and by the 20th century, Jews enjoyed many prestigious and powerful positions in politics, the economy, academia, and the arts. However, many anti-Semites felt that the Jewish community had too much influence for their small numbers (700,000 out of 69 million Germans when WWII began).

Additionally, in the years after WWI and the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, communism had gained traction in much of Europe, including Germany, resulting in urban unrest and a low-level civil war in the years immediately after the war. Though many far-right extremists saw communist conspiracies in virtually everything, it was true that many, if not most, of the communist parties in Europe took their lead directly from the Soviet Union, which was the territory of the former Russian Empire.

Among its many tenets, communism proclaimed a brotherhood among men (especially those of the working classes) regardless of race. Adding to the irritation among German nationalists was the idea that the Jews controlled the communist movement. While it is true that a number of Jewish (including Lenin’s righthand man, Trotsky) were influential in the communist movement, it is also true that they were a minority in that

movement and experienced prejudice both within the Communist Party and without.

Still, given the dire situation in Germany after WWI, the tragic human tendency to “scapegoat” singled out Jews and communists for all of the troubles affecting the nation in the years after the First World War. So, it should come as no surprise to the reader that when Hitler began to contemplate his invasion of the Soviet Union (USSR), with whom he had signed a non-aggression pact in 1939, a very large target was put on the city of Leningrad—the home of Soviet communism.

Hitler had proclaimed his desire to conquer the lands of the Soviet Union in his book *Mein Kampf*, written in the early 1920s. He believed that the crowded Germany, which had nearly seventy million people jammed into a space a bit bigger than the US states of Washington and Oregon combined, “deserved” (by way of its superiority) to expand into the “open” spaces of the Soviet Union.

While it was true that there were vast unoccupied areas in the Soviet Union, there were still an estimated one hundred and forty million people living there. To Hitler, however, these mostly Slavic people were among the *Untermensch* (“sub-humans”) of the world, who were meant to serve the Germans or die.

The non-aggression pact that Hitler made with Stalin was, for him, simply a stalling tactic until he could defeat the Western Powers of France and Great Britain and rebuild his strength. With the pact, he could do this and receive raw materials from the USSR.

For his part, Stalin breathed a sigh of relief when he signed the pact with Hitler. While his armed forces were vast, he had recently ordered a purge of the officer corps, with the result that many of the Red Army’s most experienced officers had been killed or dismissed/jailed. Additionally, Stalin had seen the ease with which Hitler had taken Poland, but more importantly, he had seen Hitler defeat the leading military powers of Europe, France and Great Britain, in his takeover of Western Europe. The Soviet leader knew that his army was not nearly ready to take on the German *Wehrmacht*, as Hitler’s armed forces were known.

In his book, Hitler had declared that the biggest German blunder of WWI was fighting a war on two fronts, one against France and Britain (which included the US in 1917) in the west and another with Russia in the east.

Though Hitler did this same thing in 1941 when he ordered the Russian invasion, Hitler believed that with the forces of Great Britain essentially bottled up on their home island, he had essentially defeated the British, and they would come to terms at some point in the near future. Although it was a colossal mistake, it is easy to see how Hitler made it. Aside from the far front in North Africa, the British were essentially trapped on their island and, at least for the time being, posed no real threat to Germany's rear should Hitler turn eastward.

Figuring into Hitler's thinking was the notion, which was shared by many (but not all) of his generals, that the Soviet Union would be rapidly defeated, just as powerful France had been. After all, by 1941, the Soviets had fought a war with tiny Finland in which they were victorious, but this was only due to overwhelming numbers and the overcoming of the truly poor leadership and battlefield performance that took place during the first part of the conflict.

Hitler's plan to invade the USSR was solidified by the performance of the Red Army in Finland. In the winter of 1940, he ordered his commanders to finalize plans for the invasion and to be ready to attack on May 15th, 1941. However, unbeknownst to Hitler, his fascist Italian ally, Benito Mussolini, who was bent on claiming a "new Roman Empire" for himself, attacked Greece in the fall of 1940.

By early 1941, it was clear that Mussolini needed help subduing the Greeks. Not only did Hitler divert sizable troops to Greece, but he was also forced to invade and conquer Yugoslavia after that country underwent a coup, in which they forced a pro-German king out of power and replaced him with his pro-Ally son, who refused to grant Hitler passage through his country.

Though Hitler subdued both Yugoslavia and Greece, these "sideshow" threw off his timetable by over a month, which was likely a crucial month as the Russian winter would set in November 1941, German troops were at the gates of Moscow. It's quite likely had the Germans arrived outside of the Soviet capital before the snow arrived, Moscow and perhaps the war would have been theirs.

The onset of winter may have also prevented the Germans from taking the "Venice of the North" and the home of the Bolshevik Revolution: Leningrad.

apter 3 – The Plan

On June 22nd, 1941, three million German soldiers invaded the Soviet Union. With them were sizable contingents of Romanians, Hungarians, and Finns. Each of these nations had historical grievances and claims against Russia and joined Hitler in his plan to destroy the Soviet Union.

For the purposes of this book, it is the Finns that concern us the most among Hitler's allies. As a former part of the Russian Empire, which was given a grudging independence by Lenin in 1918, the Finns had both suffered a costly Soviet-backed communist uprising/civil war and been attacked by the Soviets in late 1939.

As has been mentioned, the Red Army paid a high price for its achievements in Finland, which were the possession of a number of fortified islands in the Gulf of Finland (which led directly to Leningrad), the cession of an area in the far north near the White Sea coast, and, most importantly, the Karelian Peninsula, which lies between the Gulf of Finland and the large Lake Ladoga to the north, which is the most direct route to Leningrad from the west.



Illustration 2: Final stages and end-line of Soviet-Finnish War 1940
(courtesy ww2total.com)

As you can see on the map, at the war's end, the Soviets had succeeded in pushing the Finnish Army off the Karelian Peninsula, providing a buffer zone for Leningrad should an attack come that way again. Pre-Hitler Germany had provided troops and aid to Finland during the Finnish Civil War, and a substantial number of Finns had volunteered to fight for Germany in France during WWI, so a German-Finnish attack down the Karelian Peninsula was something to be seriously considered by Stalin and the Red Army.

In the months prior to the German invasion of the USSR, Hitler had consulted with the Finns, specifically the commander of the Finnish armed forces, Field Marshal Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim, and convinced them to join his efforts against Stalin. However, Mannerheim and the Finns, not entirely convinced that Hitler could defeat the Soviets, hedged their bets for the future: they agreed to join Hitler in his attack against Russia but only to the point of recovering the land they had lost in the Winter War of 1939/40. This meant that the Finns, with an army that had grown in size from 450,000 to 700,000, would not take part in the attack and siege of Leningrad, which was another factor that may have cost Hitler the city.

The Finns did provide Hitler with some important low-level intelligence, such as local troop movements, at the onset of the campaign, which proved helpful. But the Finns stuck to their position, seizing only the land they had lost to Stalin in 1940. Throughout the rest of the conflict, Hitler would pressure and cajole the Finns into attacking farther than they had agreed, asking, in particular, that they help in the siege of Leningrad by shelling and bombing the city. Aside from perhaps a few stray shells, the Finns refrained from taking part in the siege of the city until it was broken in 1944. They did, however, apply pressure and threaten movement to the north of the city, which forced the Soviets to keep substantial forces from the Leningrad pocket. However, by 1944, the Soviet advantage in troops and materiel was so huge that the Finns' small effort was reduced to virtually nothing.

Hitler, in defiance of his generals who wished to make an all-out push toward Moscow when the German invasion began, believed that Leningrad should be the first main target, followed in priority by the Donetsk Basin of southern Russia and Ukraine (a source of many raw materials) and then Moscow.

Leningrad was first on Hitler's list for a number of reasons. First, as has been said, the symbolism of Leningrad as the "Home of the Revolution" was not lost on Hitler and many other Germans. By taking the city, he hoped to strike a symbolic blow against communism.

Second, Leningrad was home to hundreds of factories, both large and small, and was one of the biggest industrial centers of the USSR, alone comprising around 11 percent of the nation's industrial production. By taking the Soviets "second city," he would be perhaps dealing a mortal blow to Soviet industrial capacity.

Third, Leningrad was home to the Soviet Baltic Fleet. If Hitler could seize the city, the Soviets would be forced to abandon and/or scuttle their ships. They would not even be able to use their firepower in defense of the city, which was something they did throughout the siege, even moving the large main guns of the famous cruiser *Aurora* to Pulkovo Heights to the south of the city to shell German positions.

Lastly, the capture of Leningrad would deal a serious blow to the morale of the Soviet people. Hitler and many others in Germany believed that because of the harsh nature of the Soviet regime, rapid and successive defeats of the Red Army and the capture of important territories and cities would cause the regime to crumble from within. If that was the case, Hitler believed he could force the Russians to cede all of their territories west of the Ural Mountains to him. Hitler's famous words as the Germans planned the campaign was, "We have only to kick in the door, and the whole rotten structure will come crashing down." He even reportedly went so far as to have invitations printed for a grand reception in Leningrad's famed Hotel Astoria to be held when the city fell.

apter 4 – Attack

On June 22nd, 1941, the invasion of the Soviet Union, codenamed Operation Barbarossa, began. Despite warnings coming from his intelligence services, spies, and military that Hitler was planning to move against him, Stalin was caught flat-footed by the German attack. Normally the most paranoid of people, the Soviet dictator (for reasons no one is exactly sure of) was surprised by Hitler's assault. Some believe it was because he could not conceive Hitler committing the same blunder (a two-front war) that he had so vehemently criticized in his book *Mein Kampf*.

Others thought that Stalin could not conceive that Hitler, who was receiving *massive* amounts of Soviet raw materials and food under the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939 at good prices, would risk war when he could have almost everything he wanted without firing a shot.

Another reason historians put forward is that Stalin knew of the immense strength at his disposal. Though the Soviets were still in the process of reorganizing after Stalin's purges and the Winter War with Finland, the Red Army's strength, at least on paper, was massive. However, there were a few caveats to the large numbers of Soviet men and machines.

First, many Soviet formations, mostly the infantry divisions, were poorly trained and lacked experience. In some cases, there were not enough personal weapons for each man. Many of the men manning the front lines against the Germans were barely recruits; some of them had less than five days of training or, in many cases, less.

Second, though the Soviets boasted massive numbers of tanks and other armored vehicles, many of them were obsolete. However, at the onset of battle, the Soviets possessed two of the best tanks in the world at the time: the T-34 and the KV-1. Still, those tanks were relatively new and were only present on the battlefields during the summer of 1941 in small numbers. Additionally, though most Soviet armored forces had received more and better training than their infantry counterparts, they were still inferior in training compared to the Germans, especially when it came to communication and mass maneuver warfare.

Third, large Soviet formations were positioned in the Far East along their borders with China and Mongolia to protect against a possible attack by the Japanese, who had been expanding their territory in Asia since 1931 and

had millions of men in China. The Red Army and the Japanese Imperial Army had clashed numerous times between May and September 1939 in the area of Khalkhin Gol, Mongolia, and though these clashes ended in Soviet victories, Stalin was concerned the Japanese would attempt to move on mineral-rich Siberia while he was fighting Hitler in the west. It was not until late 1941 that Soviet spies reported that Japan's military was planning an offensive strike westward against the United States and British possessions in the Pacific. Upon hearing this, Stalin moved these troops to fight Hitler.

Still, Stalin was the commander of the largest armed force in the world, and despite the rapid German victories in 1939/40, he was convinced his forces could stand up against Hitler. Hitler himself, meeting with Finnish Marshal Mannerheim on the latter's birthday in 1942, was recorded as saying that if he had known of the Soviets' massive strength, he might have delayed or even canceled his offensive. An interesting note about this discussion is that it is the only surviving voice recording of Hitler partaking in a conversation. In the opening days of the attack, Stalin seemed to have gone into a depression, which was brought on by the shock of Hitler's attack. He made no speech about the invasion until the first part of August, leaving matters in the hands of his foreign minister, Vyacheslav Molotov.

The only real order Stalin gave was for the Red Army to attack—everywhere. This played right into the hands of the Germans, whose blitzkrieg (“lightning war”) tactics called for the deep armored penetration of the enemy's front lines, to cut off supplies and reinforcements, and sow panic in the enemy rear and surround enemy formations, with the infantry moving and/or holding the enemy in position until the armored units could attack from the rear.

In the first weeks of the war in the east, the Soviets attempted to blunt the German attack with seemingly random and poorly organized attacks and counterattacks. As Hitler did at the end of the war when he attempted to convince himself that his soldiers “national socialist ardor” would win despite all odds, at the start of Operation Barbarossa, Stalin urged his men (and, as time went by, women) at the front lines to fight as “good Communists.”

In case after case, the Soviets attacked regardless of the cost in human life. As many people in the West saw in the movie about the later Battle of

Stalingrad, *Enemy at the Gates* (2001), men were ordered forward without arms and instructed to pick up the rifles and machine guns of those who had died in front of them.

In some places, like at the huge Battle of Smolensk and a few others, the Red Army fought with skill and tenacity, but German tactics and skilled command still won. Hundreds of thousands of Soviet troops were killed, and on the open plains and rolling hills of western Russia and Ukraine, millions of Red Army men were surrounded and captured. Over the course of the war, an estimated five million Soviet soldiers died in or as a result of German captivity.

The German attack came in three main thrusts and was divided into three “Army Groups”: North, Centre, and South, which were arranged from north to south. The objective of Army Group South under Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt (1875–1953) was to seize Ukraine, the Donetsk Basin, and the Black Sea coast. Army Group Centre was tasked with destroying the armies defending Moscow and seizing the capital city, and it was commanded by Field Marshal Fedor von Bock (1880–1945).

Army Group North’s objectives included conquering the Baltic states, where sizable portions of the population welcomed them as liberators, and seizing Leningrad. The commander of Army Group North was Field Marshal Wilhelm von Leeb (1876–1956), who had been promoted to the highest rank in the German Army along with the two other Army Group commanders after the defeat of France.



Illustration 3: A general overview of the initial stages of the German invasion of the USSR

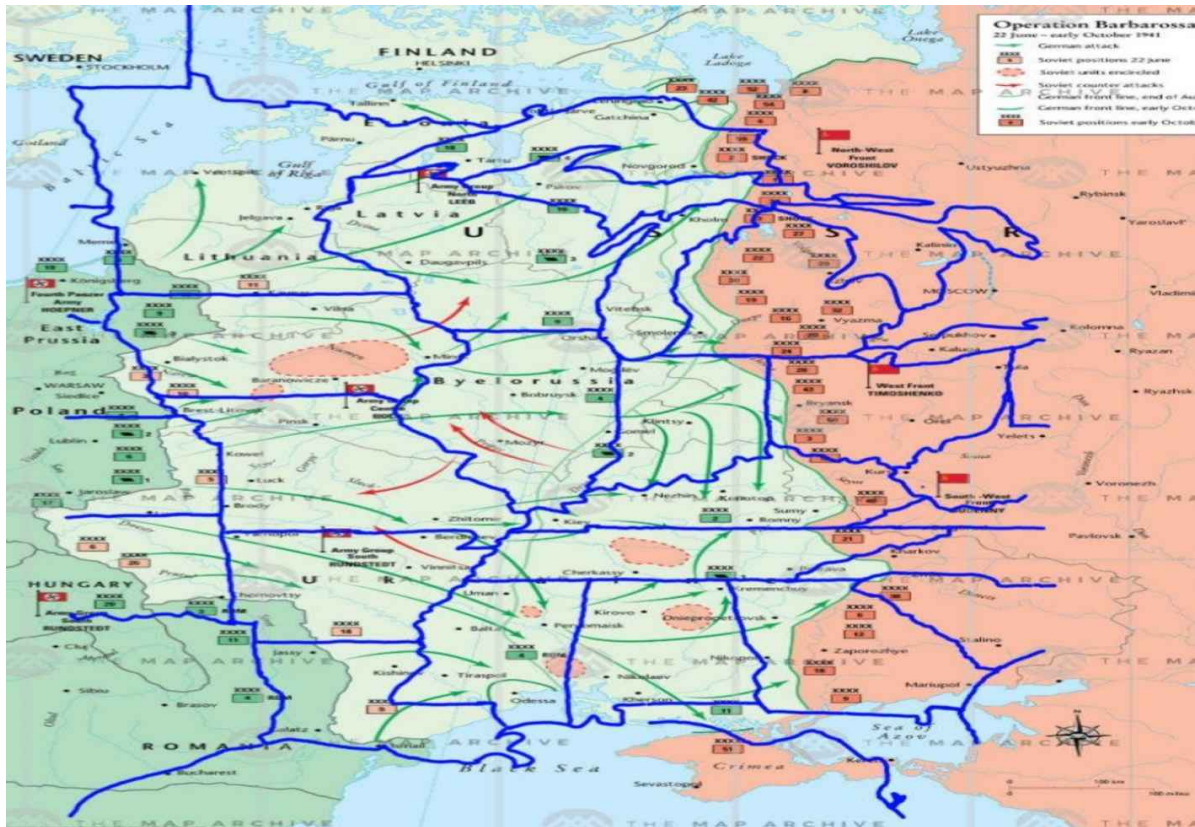


Illustration 4: Part of the United States compared to the area of Operation Barbarossa

Leeb was a decorated WWI veteran who added the title “Ritter” (“Ritter” is similar to a knight) to his name by winning the Pour le Mérite (also known as the “Blue Max”), the highest pre-WWII military decoration in Germany. Though Leeb was opposed to Hitler, he was placated by the Fuhrer with titles and lands. This did not stop him from criticizing the plans to invade neutral Belgium in 1940, but he followed orders nonetheless. For his part in the western campaign, he was made a field marshal. As you will see, the German push on Leningrad stalled in the early winter of 1941, and von Leeb was replaced, after which he asked to retire. He remained on the sidelines for the rest of the war, but for his actions during Operation Barbarossa, in which units under his command committed hundreds of atrocities, he was prosecuted for war crimes once the war ended. He, sadly, like many others, only served a relatively light sentence of three years.



Illustration 5: Autographed picture of von Leeb, with Field Marshal's baton, 1940

Within three weeks, Army Group North had penetrated over 300 miles into the Baltic states, which had been annexed by Stalin in 1940. Lithuania, most of Latvia, and part of Estonia were taken by the Germans by July 10th. However, as the Germans approached the Leningrad area, Soviet resistance stiffened. From July 10th to August 25th, the Germans drove another 150

miles closer to the city, which was half the distance they had covered in their drive into the Baltic states in the same amount of time. The last fifty miles to the gates of Leningrad were covered in a little over two months, but Leningrad was cut off by land on September 8th. The German forces drove deeper into the USSR, reaching Tikhvin by November 8th.

Of course, the attack of Army Group North was not solely focused on Leningrad, though the city was its main objective. Army Group North's area of responsibility bordered on the Baltic Sea in the north to an artificial line some 200 miles south, where Army Group B's area of operations lay.

To the north, the Finns had begun their effort to regain their lost territory on June 25th, three days after Barbarossa began. In late July, they had reached their former borders and, with some small exceptions for reasons of military necessity, stopped their attacks there. In September, Hitler sent the first of many envoys to Finland in an attempt to convince them to push their attack farther toward Leningrad and into the Soviet Union. As was mentioned earlier, all of these efforts were politely rebuffed.

Interestingly, the Spanish, whose victorious fascists Hitler had aided in their civil war against their Soviet-backed communist enemies, sent a division of men to the Eastern Front. This was known as the Azul ("Blue") Division, and they spent much of their time on the southern edge of Army Group North.

When Army Group North approached Leningrad, it included some twenty-nine divisions, both infantry and armor, and one Luftwaffe Fleet Air arm. Though it was the weakest of the German army groups, Army Group North still numbered some 750,000 to 800,000 men when the battle began. (See Appendix A.)

The Soviet forces in the Baltic and Leningrad areas amounted to nearly one million men. The Baltic and Leningrad Fronts' (Front being the Soviet designation equivalent to the German Army Group) organization and numbers at the start of the battle are located in Appendix B at the end of this book.

The siege of Leningrad officially began on September 8th, 1941, when all physical contact with the outside world, save Lake Ladoga, had been cut off completely. The "900 Days" had thus begun.

Chapter 5 – Civilians and Defense

The Soviet commander of the Leningrad area (the Northern Front) when the war began was Lieutenant-General Markian Popov (1902–1969). Popov had joined the Red Army at the age of eighteen and fought in the latter days of the Russian Civil War. He was one of the few higher officers who survived Stalin's purges in the late 1930s, and he was known to be ruthless himself when he needed to be. In June 1941, just before the German invasion, he was named commander of the Leningrad Military District, and two days after the invasion, he became the commander of the Northern Front. As such, he worked hand in hand with the political Council of Deputies in Leningrad to establish a defensive perimeter around the city. Popov would soon be moved to another command, and the command of the Leningrad Military District would pass to Marshal Kliment Voroshilov, who is perhaps most known for having the famous "KV" series of Soviet tanks named after him.



Illustration 6: Popov after the war

Around the city, a series of strong defensive belts were constructed and/or dug. Civilians were pressed into duty, but although discipline was harsh for slacking or not showing up, most Leningraders needed no coercion to work on the battlements. Many of the older citizens had been exposed to or were experienced at war. It also helped that as the German lines pushed closer and closer to the city, the Germans' methods and behavior became increasingly clear, as refugees from western Russia poured into the area.

Soviet propaganda naturally did its job, but the Nazis' cruelty essentially created the headlines without much need to spin the story.

By the time of the Germans' first bombardment of the city in late August, many of the defensive structures around the city were complete or nearly so. Historian Richard Bidlack of Washington and Lee University compiled the extent of the defensive belts. The first, which was already in place and being modernized, was the Karelian Fortified Region, which bordered Finland. Soldiers, sailors, and civilians dug some 430 miles of deep, wide anti-tank ditches, a stunning 16,000 miles of trenches in a system that ran throughout the Leningrad area for many square miles, over 5,000 fortified pillboxes (made of both earth and wood and reinforced concrete), nearly 200 miles of timber barricades, and nearly 400 miles of wire entanglements. It likely would have taken the Germans a miracle to break through these defenses and into the city itself.





Illustration 7: In these two photos from 1941, we see Leningraders of all ages digging trenches. The temperatures in the winter of 1941 reached -40°F.

Leningrad's population before the war was 3.1 million, with another approximately 400,000 living in the suburbs around the city. Despite Soviet propaganda at the beginning of the campaign that said that the Germans would be stopped before they came close to Leningrad, the evacuations of children and the elderly began a month and a half before the Germans cut the city off. Due to the lack of transport, the hectic war situation, and the priority given to military supplies and men, many children, elderly, and sick people remained in the city for the first horrible winter of 1941/42. Eventually, an estimated 1.8 million people would be taken from the city and relocated to various parts of the Soviet Union. Most of them would be settled far from the front lines: the farms of Central Asia, the factories of the Urals, and some along the Volga River. An unfortunate few were evacuated to a city called Stalingrad.

WWII (or the Great Patriotic War as it is still known in Russia and other parts of the former Soviet Union) in the East was a war of extermination and enslavement. Surrender meant death, both for the millions who did perish in the prisoner of war, concentration, and extermination camps (Russian POWs were the "guinea pigs" to test the effectiveness of the poison gas Zyklon B at Auschwitz-Birkenau), as well as for many of the civilians who found themselves behind enemy lines.

To that end, as you read above with the mobilization of the population in the fortification of the city, the People's Militia ("Narodnoe Opolcheniye"

in Russian) was raised. In the area of Leningrad, a total of ten divisions were eventually raised. A number of them were converted into regular divisions and took part in the rest of the war. At first, these groups were poorly armed but, for the most part, highly spirited, and they eagerly took part in the defense of their city. By the end of the first week of July, these units numbered nearly 100,000 men. Many of the officers were retired Red Army officers, members of the reserves, workers, and many of the older high school and university students of the city.



Illustration 8: People's Militia members receiving the excellent Mosin-Nagant rifle, Leningrad, 1941

As was mentioned, the overall command of the Leningrad Military District fell to Marshal Kliment Voroshilov. Working with and observing Voroshilov was Andrei Zhdanov, a high-ranking official in the Communist Party and a crony of Josef Stalin. In fact, Zhdanov was thought to be Stalin's successor when the war ended, but he died before Stalin. Both Voroshilov and Zhdanov could be utterly ruthless when needed. Voroshilov had signed the order for the infamous 1940 Katyn massacre in Poland, where thousands of Polish officers and officials were executed and buried in mass graves. Zhdanov had personally signed hundreds of execution orders during the 1930s and had helped Stalin put in motion the Great Terror of the 1930s, in which millions of people were jailed or killed. In the case of the many law-breakers and deserters, the two officials often arranged a trial on the spot, which quickly convicted the "criminals," and signed or ordered their death by firing squad.

Voroshilov was personally very brave, and on at least one occasion, he led a Soviet counterattack from the front, pistol in hand. However, he was not the greatest military thinker. In September, on the same day the Germans had completed their encirclement of Leningrad, Stalin relieved Voroshilov from command and sent him elsewhere. His replacement was to become the most famous Soviet commander of the war, General (and later Field Marshal) Georgy Zhukov.



Illustration 9: Zhukov during the attack on Berlin, 1945

Zhukov was to the Soviet war effort what Dwight D. Eisenhower was to the Americans and what Bernard Montgomery was to the British. All three commanded their nation's armies in Europe, and all three were given credit for their part in the defeat of Hitler.

However, Zhukov's place in Russian military history is different. Beginning in 1938, with him in command of the Soviet forces during the defeat of the Japanese in Mongolia, Zhukov was either in direct command or involved in the most famous Soviet victories of the war: holding the Germans at Leningrad, defeating them at the gates of Moscow, the architect of the victory at Stalingrad, a key figure in the war's largest tank battle at Kursk in 1943, and the commander of the largest Soviet Army Group at the victory in Berlin. In fact, it is his face that is most associated with the Soviet victory, along with Stalin's. After the war, Stalin actually saw Zhukov as a political threat and sent him far from Moscow to commands of little

importance. Later, Zhukov would stage a comeback, but in 1957, he fell out of favor again, this time with Premier Nikita Khrushchev, and died in quiet retirement.

Zhukov has sometimes been compared to American General Ulysses S. Grant. He, like Grant, knew that he had the advantage of numbers and that he could afford to lose many more men than the enemy. Still, Zhukov was a brilliant strategist—one only has to look at the masterful Soviet stand and counterattack at Stalingrad to see this, and he was also a master of logistics. Zhukov was left with the overall command of Leningrad even while organizing the defense of Moscow and the successful Soviet counterattack there in December 1941. In April 1942, after the worst part of the first winter siege was over, the command on the ground in Leningrad was given to General (later Field Marshal) Leonid Govorov, who commanded the defense of the city until the siege was broken in 1944.



Illustration 10: Govorov, who was considered a master in the use of artillery, at the war's end.

apter 6 – The Battlefield

During the 900 Days, hundreds of battles, large and small, took place. For the soldiers of the *Wehrmacht* and the Red Army, many of whom remained in the area throughout the siege, time lost meaning, perhaps only noticed when the seasons changed. The winters in Russia were cold, brutally so. Fall and spring were temperate for the most part, but those months were often filled with rain, which often turned the battlefield, trenches, and roads into a sea of unbelievably sloppy, deep mud. Summer was tolerable, except that in the Far North, summer, especially in those areas near water, was a time for swarms of mosquitoes that literally made it difficult to breathe.

For the Germans, as well as the Soviet citizens within Leningrad, the worst time, obviously, was winter. The war years saw some of the coldest winters of the 20th century throughout Europe, and in Russia, it was far worse. As many people know, the German Army was woefully unprepared for the Russian winter.

There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, the Russian winter has to be experienced, and though one can read about it in a book (which Hitler obviously did not do, according to a speech by British Prime Minister Winston Churchill), nothing can prepare a person for -40°F temperatures. Think about that for a moment: on a day when it's 40°F outside in the morning, one wears a sweater and perhaps a coat and jacket. If the temperature rises by thirty degrees, a person might wear a short-sleeved shirt and shorts. But, if it's -40°F and the mercury rises by thirty degrees, it's still -10°F!

Secondly, the German command, beginning with Hitler, expected and prepared for a quick victory, and in the first weeks of the battle, it seemed they were right. But as you have read, the Soviet resistance stiffened, and the Germans were stopped outside Leningrad in September and Moscow in November.

It should be mentioned, though, that although it is true that the Soviets were better prepared for the cold than the Germans, that doesn't mean they didn't suffer as well. Frostbite was a killer of thousands of men (and women and children in the city) on both sides. Soviet soldiers, especially in that first year of the war, suffered from a shortage of proper boots, gloves, and parkas. In the city, things were worse.

In the rest of this chapter, we will take you through the major military events of the siege. In the following chapters, you will read about the suffering of those inside the city and the efforts of the Soviets to relieve that suffering.

The first attack on Leningrad came on the day after Operation Barbarossa began when the Germans sent a wave of Junkers 88 medium bombers over the city. Little damage was done, and the Soviets scored a propaganda victory when one of the bomber crews was forced to make an emergency landing within the Soviet defensive ring. The crew survived and was paraded in front of Soviet cameras and citizens.

The Germans continued sending bombers over the city as they approached. On September 8th, 1941, they completed the encirclement of the city with the capture of Shlisselburg, on the southern end of Lake Ladoga, after which they began to shell Leningrad with cannons and mortars of all sizes, including some of the largest siege guns of the war, which fired shells that weighed up to four metric tons. The first casualties in the city proper are pictured below. The sight of bodies lying in the street was to become all too common for the people of Leningrad.



Illustration 11: The dead from the shelling, at the corners of Nevsky and Ligorsky Avenues, September 8th, 1941

The Germans would penetrate as far east as Tikhvin but would shortly be forced from that town, some 134 miles from Leningrad. Their encirclement in the east would center on the town of Volkhov for most of the siege.

As they approached the city, and as they sent more and more planes (both combat and photo-reconnaissance) over the city and its defenses, the Germans realized that breaking into the city would be very costly. Firstly, and most obviously, there would be many German casualties. Second, they would have to deal with the population of the city, and even though the Germans had already proved they could be ruthless in their occupations, taking the city itself would mean leaving a considerable number of men behind to maintain control.

So, beginning in September, Hitler issued a series of edicts and made speeches in which he made it clear to the world and to his military that he “had no wish in saving the lives of the civilian population” and that “Leningrad must die of starvation.”

Militarily, the front at Leningrad was what a soldier might call relatively quiet. But when you consider what “quiet” might mean in the context of WWII on the Eastern Front, well...The action around Leningrad, with some exceptions, was very reminiscent of the trench warfare of WWI, and the Red Army soldiers in the trenches were subject to constant (or the threat of constant) bombardments from cannons and the air. Of course, the German soldiers in the trenches were subject to the same, which only increased in volume from the spring of 1942 onward.

Each side deployed snipers throughout the area, hoping to kill officers in particular but killing anyone dumb or inexperienced enough to stick their heads up for too long. Each side tallied perhaps thousands of deaths due to sniper fire over the course of the siege. Though there were perhaps “sniper duels” that rivaled the famous (and likely fictional) duel between Soviet sniper Vasily Zaitsev (who was real) and the German major Erwin König (who was not), these duels are likely well known only to researchers and military buffs interested in snipers. However, we do know that in addition to the hundreds of brave men who ventured out into “no man’s land” to hunt the enemy, the Soviets did deploy considerable numbers of women.

Additionally, the Soviets launched guerrilla-type raids and scouting parties into German lines and captured towns and villages. Not only did they observe German units and movements, but they also met with Soviet

civilians. They got information from these civilians, and they let them know in no uncertain terms that they were watching and that the penalties for collaboration would be harsh. In remote areas of the captured areas, some Soviet units did hold drumhead trials, in which death sentences by firing squad were handed out.

Once the Germans had established their ring around the city, the front lines remained largely unchanged for over the next 800 days.



Illustration 12: Leningrad front lines, 1941–43 (courtesy strategic-culture.org)

In January 1942, after the successful defense and counterattack at Moscow had pushed the Germans away from the Soviet capital some 150 to 200 miles, Stalin looked for another opportunity to push the Germans westward and to raise morale in the country. On January 7th, an attack began on the southeastern shores of Lake Ladoga in the north to the northern shore of Lake Ilmen to the south, a front of about 150 to 160 miles in breadth.

The Soviets succeeded in pushing back the Germans in a few places, with the deepest penetration of the Nazi lines coming from the Soviet Second Shock Army under General Andrey Vlasov, who later became a footnote to history by defecting to the Germans and leading the Committee for the Liberation of the Peoples of Russia. This committee, which consisted of about 180 Soviet generals and officers and some thousands of men, fought for the Germans; they actually only fought against the Red Army once, two months before Hitler's defeat. Seeing the writing on the wall after this one conflict the committee engaged in, Vlasov turned on the Germans and attempted to ingratiate himself to the Soviets. He was taken prisoner and hanged after the war.

The offensive of early 1942 briefly pushed the Germans back, but the ring on Leningrad was not broken.

There were two major offensives in the late summer of 1942, one from the Soviets, the other from the Germans. Both sides planned to launch offensives virtually at the same time. The Soviet Sinyavino Offensive (named after a location on the front) began before the German Operation Nordlicht (“Northern Lights”) could begin.

Hitler realized that the Allied (which now included America) convoys bringing aid to the USSR via the Soviet port of Murmansk in the far north (some 85 miles from the Finnish/German-Soviet front to the west) had to be interrupted. The Germans were sometimes quite successful in destroying many of these convoys at sea and would, at times, completely halt them, but they never did so permanently. In the fall of 1942, Hitler decided that he would need to cut off Murmansk by severing the railway that led from the port into the rest of the Soviet Union. He also determined that the sizable forces in Leningrad, which were surrounded at this time, would be a constant threat to his efforts and ordered the city to be taken or destroyed. The officer in command, Field Marshal Georg von Küchler, protested the plan as being simply impossible given the state of Leningrad’s defenses and resigned. The command was then given to one of Hitler’s most able commanders, Field Marshal Erich von Manstein.

However, before Operation Nordlicht could begin, the Soviets launched their attack. The Soviet attack was successful in places but never really got off the ground. When Manstein counterattacked and surrounded the aforementioned Soviet Second Shock Army, the Soviet offensive stalled, and the German siege and encirclement continued. The German counterattack saw the first use of the famed Panzer V “Tiger” tank, but the tanks had limited numbers and limited effectiveness due to mechanical issues that still needed to be worked out.

Some five months later, on January 12th, 1943, the Soviets launched Operation Iskra (meaning “Spark,” which was aptly named since Lenin’s original Bolshevik Party newspaper, printed in Leningrad, was named *Iskra*) to open a corridor to the city. The Soviets knew that considerable numbers of German troops had been taken from the area and sent to other parts of the front, namely either directly to Stalingrad (where the siege went on from August to early February 1943) or to areas stripped of men.



Illustration 13: Operation Iskra, 1943 (courtesy strategic-culture.org)

Operation Iskra saw about 400,000 Soviets drive forward against some 300,000 German troops. By this time in the war, however, the materiel advantage was decidedly in Soviet hands. The Soviets fielded 500 tanks against the Germans' 50. The Germans possessed 700 artillery pieces in the area, while the Russians deployed over 4,500. German airpower, at this point, was virtually non-existent in the area, and the Russians flew some 900 aircraft (mostly fighters and the famed tank-destroying Ilyushin IL-2) over the battlefield.

Still, the Germans had had over a year and a half to prepare their defenses in the area, so the fighting wasn't easy. But by the end of January, the Soviets, after sustaining over 30,000 dead, had linked up with the trapped army at Leningrad, albeit in a narrow corridor. At that point, the Germans had halted the Soviet drive and were still in artillery range of the city, especially to the southwest, but a land corridor for Soviet supplies to reach the trapped forces had been opened. Soon, Red Army engineers had built a railway into the city, and increasing amounts of supplies came into the "Venice of the North." Despite this, the siege went on, and the deaths stacked up, although thankfully not at the rates of the winter of 1941/42.

The following year, on January 27th, over 800,000 men engaged in the massive Soviet push known as the Leningrad-Novgorod Offensive

(Novgorod was an ancient Russian city on the southern end of the effort), which ended the German siege for good.



Illustration 14: Leningraders welcoming Red Army soldiers at the end of the siege, 1944

apter 7 – Inside the City

During the siege, the Germans suffered a total of half a million casualties (mostly consisting of wounded and missing). The Red Army had considerably more, and it was not only from combat but also from hunger. Some estimates approach 400,000 dead. But it was the civilians who bore the brunt of the horror. In the grand scope of the Eastern Front in WWII, the casualty numbers in Leningrad for the nearly three years of the siege are somewhat “normal.” What marks Leningrad out in history is the suffering and endurance of the civilians inside the German ring.

Estimates vary widely. Post-war Soviet estimates put the death toll near 600,000. After the death of Stalin, that was revised upward, for reasons we will discuss at the end of this book. After the fall of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, when more records were made available and/or discovered, the numbers were revised upward again. Further studies in the late 1990s and early 2000s have put the total dead in Leningrad at just over one million, with about 700,000 of them being civilians.

Most of those 700,000 died from hunger, and the majority of those were in the first year of the siege, though the deaths continued until the German ring was broken. Frostbite, sickness (luckily major epidemics were avoided by hard work and diligence on the part of the government and people working together, though there were small outbreaks of cholera and typhus), and deaths from German artillery and bombs all contributed to that ghastly total. Of course, “normal” causes of death, such as heart attacks, also occurred during the siege, and it is more than likely that these deaths increased because of it.

When the Germans began shelling and bombing the city, they did so with meticulous care. They didn’t do this to avoid civilian casualties but rather to cause them. The German artillery and air units were in possession of quite detailed maps of the city, and pre-war intelligence supplied additional information, so the Germans knew exactly where to hit.

On the tenth day of the siege, over 275 German bombers launched an attack on the city. One thousand civilians were killed on that day alone. Among the prime targets were hospitals and the city’s largest shopping area, where German bombardiers knew that people on the street would take shelter. The city’s main food supply area was also significantly damaged on September 12th.

One of the many flaws of the Soviet system was that it was based largely on fear. This was especially true under Stalin. No one wanted to be the person to bring Stalin a bad report. This is one reason why the pre-war famine in Ukraine was so large and prolonged. No one wanted to say they weren't doing what they were expected to do, such as collect food, so false reports were made. This also happened during the first days of the siege of Leningrad.

The top political officer in Leningrad was Andrei Zhdanov, thought by many to be one of the two or three men that might succeed Stalin. Zhdanov wielded incredible power in Leningrad, but his power stopped at Stalin's desk. Charged with seeing that the city was prepared for the Germans, Zhdanov exaggerated the amount of food in the city. The result? Stalin and the others in charge of supply and logistics in the high offices of government did not think Leningrad needed the food that it truly did. So, right off the bat, the city faced a shortage.

The situation was desperate almost right away, and those inside the city with any foresight knew it was going to get worse as time passed and as the weather worsened. When the food storage area was bombed, civilians gathered burning and melted liquid sugar as they ran from the flames. This sugar was obviously mixed with dirt. Some tried to heat the dirt later on to extract the sugar and sell it on the black market, something which became a huge problem during the war. Others mixed the dirt with flour and tried to make some sort of digestible cake.

Food rationing began almost immediately. Cards were issued to each person in the city with the amounts they were entitled to. This was a cold-blooded calculation but a necessary one. Essential workers (factory, munitions, police, etc.) received the largest amount. After them came the children, then the elderly and the sick. From the start, the rations were barely enough to keep a healthy person alive, and that was without considering their extra efforts in the siege and the weather.

From November 1941 (two months after the siege began) to February 1942, the bread rations were 125 grams/4.41 ounces per person. This "bread" included sawdust and other inedible ingredients. Some survivors said this was untrue, but what was true was that anyone caught stealing bread could be sentenced to five years in prison. Even before the war, this punishment was essentially a death sentence, as many were sent to Siberia. People

working to make bread at state-run bakeries were searched at the end of their shift, which sometimes lasted between twelve and sixteen hours.



Illustration 15: Typical daily ration inside Leningrad (courtesy strategic-culture.org)

Over time, the city's rats disappeared. People caught them themselves or bought them on the black market. It doesn't take one much imagination to guess what happened to the dogs and cats of Leningrad. In many cases, people gave their pets to their neighbors, and vice versa, to avoid eating their own family pet. The intestines of cats and sheep were boiled into a liquid, and oil of clove was added to what some people called "milk." Leather belts and briefcases were boiled down until they were soft enough to be chewed and digested. Glue, lipstick, wallpaper, and many other items we view as inedible were also eaten. In what was a very literate and cultured city, many diarists lamented eating their volumes of Tolstoy and Pushkin.

Along the coast, before the cold and after, seaweed was gathered and made into soup or broth. Rumors abounded about people eating congealed frozen motor oil just to keep the feeling of emptiness away. Of course, this likely killed people, but in times of extreme hunger, people will do virtually anything, which is why governments fear famine almost more than any other situation.

Shortly after the German ring closed around Leningrad, the electric power went out. Necessary work went on by candlelight and kerosene lantern, but these were all rationed. Within a matter of weeks, all the trees of Leningrad were gone. People burned them and ate the bark, which they boiled down into a kind of chewable mush. Some of the many pine trees, which burned

so quickly as to be useless except for kindling, were saved; the needles, after being boiled in water, gave the Leningraders at least a little vitamin C. The elderly and children remained in bed, if possible, in order to conserve energy and warmth, but in many cases, this just prolonged the inevitable.

By November, the extreme cold had set in. The chart below shows how deaths went up rapidly in the winter of 1941/42. Remember, the siege went on until the winter of 1944, and though the number of deaths never approached that of the first winter, they continued throughout the siege.

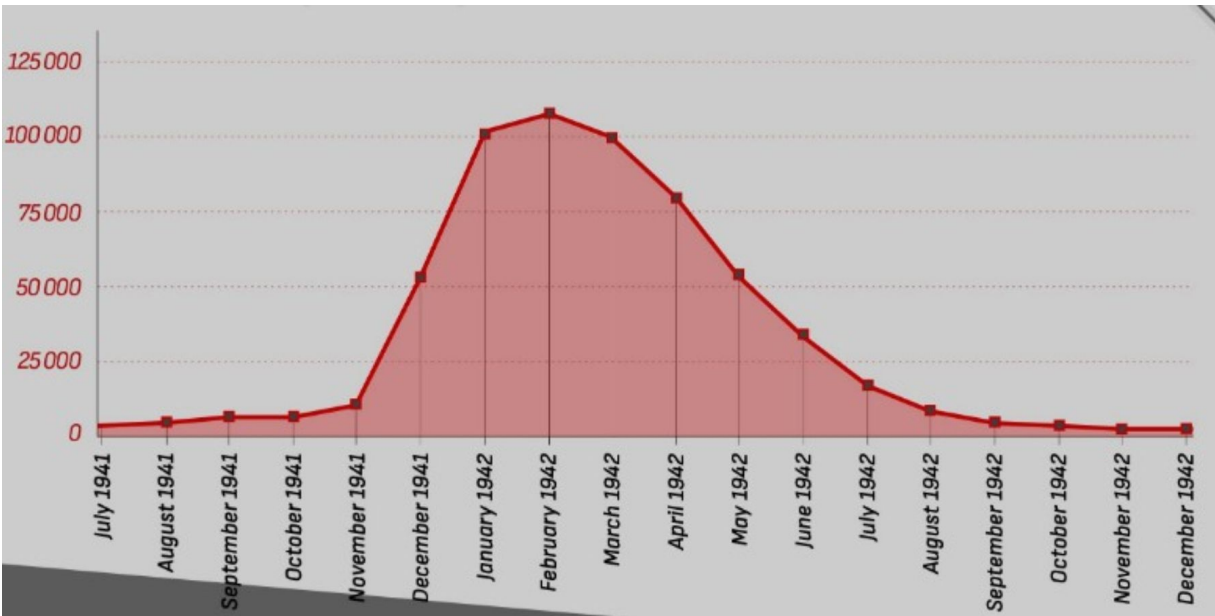


Illustration 16: Deaths in Leningrad for the first seventeen months of the siege. In February 1942, nearly 3,600 people a day were dying in the city. (courtesy strategic-culture.org)

In the winter, people literally began dropping in the street. When this first started happening, people would try to help by either notifying the authorities or taking the body to a hospital or one of the buildings set up as a morgue. But soon, people began dropping like flies—they would be walking (or rather shambling) down the street, and the next thing they knew, they would drop to the ground, stone dead. Passersby, if they could do so without being seen by the police or too many others, would make a beeline for the body and rifle through its clothes for ration cards.

The elderly, children, and the sick were not forced to get their food in person, but each home was registered with the authorities, including the names and number of its members. (One must remember that the USSR was perhaps the most totalitarian country even before the war started.) When

someone died at home, especially in the extreme cold, their deaths were often not reported for days or even longer so their families could use their extra rations.

People tried not to venture out alone for food. After all, ration card theft was rife. Tales of one's card being "stolen" did not appease the people doling out the rations, and so, losing a card was tantamount to death. Those caught stealing cards were sentenced to long terms, but a black market in counterfeit cards continued throughout the siege.

Of course, people bartered for cards, food, blankets, extra clothing, and wood, to name a few. Women traded their bodies for extra goods, but as the siege wore on, few people were interested in sex or were even able to perform.

When the war ended, and some journalists from the West and other countries were allowed in the city, some heard stories of cannibalism. The Soviet authorities were quick to deny these rumors, and many times, they refused to allow these journalists back into the country or into areas under their control in Eastern Europe. Soviet citizens caught or even rumored to have spread stories of cannibalism were often sent to the Gulag, the terrible labor camp system in Siberia. Those who returned never spoke of cannibalism again.

However, the rumors persisted over the years. When the policy of *glasnost* ("openness") was announced by Premier Mikhail Gorbachev in the mid/late 1980s, people began telling the complete story of the siege of Leningrad. When the Soviet Union fell in 1991, and many formerly hidden archives became public, what many people knew or suspected to be the truth came out: cannibalism did take place during the siege on a relatively widespread scale.

There were 1,500 instances of cannibalism recorded during the siege, but likely many more instances went undiscovered. Most of these cases were what Leningraders called "corpse-cannibalism," which consisted of one eating a person who was already dead. Oftentimes, it was the legs and buttocks that were eaten, as they are more muscular than any other part of the body. Most of the people caught and prosecuted for "corpse-cannibalism" were women trying to feed their children. Unfortunately, the files also include stories like the one in which a mother killed her eighteen-month-old to feed her other three children.

For years, rumors persisted that gangs of criminals (it should be noted that many were likely not criminals before the war) went about looking for individuals walking alone in isolated areas or at night so they might be killed. These criminals would then use the dead body as meat to be sold on the black market. They would often label the protein as “pork,” usually in the form of patties. Those caught or convicted of doing this were shot, and the secret police had a task force dedicated to finding them.

The first person to report on this in a scholarly way was the well-known American historian of Russia and the Soviet Union, Harrison Salisbury. In his book, *900 Days: The Siege of Leningrad* (1983), Salisbury interviewed many survivors who told him their personal experiences with cannibalism during the siege. The Soviets denied this vehemently, but when the archives were opened, it turned out that Salisbury had been right.

When the winter ended, authorities worried about the number of bodies in the streets buried under the snow and ice. Of course, the main concern was an epidemic starting. Soldiers, some of whom had been brought into the city during the siege, and what able-bodied people there were removed the dead, and though there were some cases of typhus and cholera, Leningrad was spared the additional horror of epidemics breaking out.



The winter of 1941/42 was the worst for the people inside the city, but as you’ve read, the siege went on for another year and a half. To keep the city

alive, the Soviets needed to bring in more men and supplies.

Another way to help keep the people alive was to try to boost morale. To that end, composer and Leningrader Dmitri Shostakovich wrote his greatest work, his Seventh Symphony, known to the world as *Leningrad*.

Shostakovich had a typical artist's relationship with the Stalin regime. In the 1930s, during Stalin's Great Terror, Shostakovich's works, which were considered too "abstract" and "elite" by Stalin, were condemned in Party newspapers and meetings. For a time, the composer worked on scoring films and trying to keep his head down. Many of his friends and protectors (such as the famed Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky) had been arrested and executed during Stalin's purges. At times, Shostakovich sat in his living room, his things gathered, waiting for the secret police to knock on the door and take him away.

Shostakovich's Fourth Symphony was influenced by the German composer Gustav Mahler (making it suspect for being "anti-worker" and "anti-Soviet"), and it was so "avant-garde" that Shostakovich's friends convinced him to withdraw its publication. His Fifth Symphony, which was more conservative in nature, put him back in Stalin's good graces, and the composer once more enjoyed popularity and some security. His Sixth Symphony was also well received.

Shostakovich wrote most of the Seventh Symphony while living in Leningrad when the siege began. He wrote the last movement in Kuibyshev (known today, as it was before the USSR, as "Samara"), where he had been evacuated with his family. To this day, no one knows for sure whether the composer meant the piece as a tribute to the city and its people. However, its heroic sound and the timing of its composing, along with the need of the government to boost morale, ensured the piece would be forever entwined with the city and the siege. Shostakovich did dedicate the piece to the city, though friends and associates are divided on the issue, with some saying it was a tribute, while others believe that it just happened to be written during the siege.

The piece was first performed in Kuibyshev in March, and its Leningrad premiere was in August 1942. Before the performance, Soviet artillery launched a barrage at the Germans surrounding the city in an effort to silence German activity. During the concert, Soviet loudspeakers at the front lines broadcasted the music to the Germans.

The performance was conducted by Karl Eliasberg, who had only fourteen of his musicians with him, as the rest had been evacuated. The orchestra was filled out by Red Army musicians and some civilians with musical experience. Soviet propaganda made a big fuss out of the performance, and it is said that German officers, upon hearing the music, became convinced that a city with the “Spirit of Leningrad” could never be taken.

The Seventh was performed in the United States, Great Britain, and elsewhere in tribute to Leningrad and their Soviet allies.

Chapter 8 – The Road of Life

To bring in the men and supplies that were so desperately needed, the Soviets had two alternatives: bring them in by air or over massive Lake Ladoga.

Though the Red Army air force was able to bring in a small number of supplies and personnel, the *Luftwaffe* (the German air force) controlled the skies throughout most of the siege, and the Germans, like the Soviets, had surrounded the city with anti-aircraft guns. And what planes the Soviets did have were desperately needed at the fighting front. That left the lake.

Lake Ladoga covers almost 7,000 square miles and is just under 140 miles long north to south. Ferries run on it when it isn't frozen over. When the lake does freeze over, the ice can be five feet thick, which is thick enough for large trucks and even a small railway to cross over it.

Those of you who have seen the film *Enemy at the Gates* have witnessed the scenes of civilians being brought out of Stalingrad and soldiers and supplies being ferried over the Volga River. Similar scenes played out at Lake Ladoga. Over the course of the siege, 1.7 million people were evacuated.

Before the ice froze completely, boats brought a limited supply of food and other needed supplies, but it was not nearly enough. A city the size of Leningrad needed 600 tons of food every day. By the end of November, the ice had frozen over enough for trucks to drive over, which brought over some sixty tons of flour, sugar, and fats. As you have read, the winter of 1941/42 was the worst, so obviously, this was not enough to sustain the population inside the city.

As time went by, the Soviets made an ice road, an exercise in engineering, hard work, diligence, and fortitude. By the fall of 1942, people were calling it the "Road of Life." Over the course of the siege, over one hundred trucks went through the ice, sometimes taking their drivers with them, though Red Army drivers became experts at driving while standing with one foot outside the truck and one hand on the wheel. Trucks continued to go over the ice until it began melting too much, and at times, there would be water and slush up to the doors of the vehicles. By December 1942, the trucks were bringing over an average of 700 tons of supplies a day. These included raw materials for the weapons factories in Leningrad, which continued to

turn out guns and even tanks during the war. Amazingly, the factories of Leningrad were able to export tanks and other weapons during the siege.



Of course, it was just a matter of time before the Germans got wind of the ice road and began to shell and bomb it. Now, the “Road of Life” was not just one route. There were at least four main routes to the city, where ports and receiving stations had to be built, as the original one at Mga had fallen into German hands. All along the routes of the “Road of Life,” the Soviets had installed massive amounts of anti-aircraft guns, machine gun emplacements, and other defensive structures. Warming stations, garages, barracks, and kitchens were built as well.

Over the course of the siege, the supplies brought into the city increased almost every month, with some fluctuation. By the spring of the first year, the “Road of Life” was bringing in just enough food to keep the city alive. Though there were hard times, much hunger, and many deaths in the city over the next year and a half, the efforts of those on the ice road kept the city alive.

Of course, both the Germans and the Finns wanted to interrupt the supplies coming over the lake. During warmer weather when there wasn’t ice, the Germans and Finns brought in the Italian motorboat squadron, XII Squadriglia MAS (12th Assault Vessel Squadron), to coordinate water operations against the ferries that brought people and supplies in and out of

the city. Put shortly, the efforts of the Germans and their allies to interrupt the flow of supplies came to virtually nothing, as the Soviets had designated too many planes and gunboats to protect the ferries.

apter 9 – Stalin Returns to His Old Methods

As you read earlier, the siege was finally broken by the Soviet Operation Iskra in late January 1944. By that time, over one million people had died within the city or from defending it. Another million had been brought out of the city during that time, with additional reinforcements being brought in. To the world, and especially the Soviet Union, Leningrad became a rallying cry. Even the Germans had to admit a grudging respect for the Soviets in and around Leningrad—some Nazi propaganda during the siege of Berlin in 1945 actually made a point of saying that if the Leningraders could do it, the Berliners certainly could.

During the war, Josef Stalin, who had been responsible for the deaths of millions before 1941, allowed the previously suppressed old Russian military symbols, like gold braids and unit banners, back to give the people a sense of national (rather than halfhearted communist) pride. He also took off some of the pressure on the Russian Orthodox Church and allowed people to worship without fear during the war. After the first months of the war, when it became clear to even him that he was no military strategist, he allowed his generals much more leeway in planning.

When the siege of Leningrad was broken, a huge cannonade celebrated the event. The press and officials lauded the people and defense of Leningrad as examples of Soviet ingenuity, guts, and innovation. This lasted until just about when the war was over.

For when that happened, the people started to talk about the horror of Leningrad and the poor planning that had allowed the starvation to set in during the siege's first days. They talked about the starvation, corruption, and bribery that took place. They also discussed officials eating while the people went hungry and the inefficient bureaucracy. In fact, in diaries from the period, Soviet bureaucrats were mentioned and vilified even more than the Germans.

They also talked about the good leaders and the many generals and soldiers that had sacrificed so much to keep the city alive. Stalin was not mentioned that much, at least not as much as he would have liked to have been.

Although he was already the most paranoid of men, Stalin entered a new phase after the war. The official death count of the siege was put at about 600,000 soldiers and civilians, even though everyone knew it was much

more. Cannibalism did not exist, as had been mentioned, and any talk of it was suppressed and/or punished. Popular leaders were removed from their positions in the city and sent to govern towns in the Soviet Far East, or they were accused of crimes they didn't commit and sent to the Gulag. Two thousand Communist Party members were purged; they were either removed from the party, jailed, or sent to Siberia. Stalin, of course, was lauded in the press and media, and he was credited with keeping Leningrad alive.

When Stalin died in 1953, things slowly began to change. In 1956, Premier Khrushchev made his famous speech criticizing Stalin and his "cult of personality." However, when more information about Leningrad came out, only the parts deemed acceptable by the Communist Party were actually released to the public. After all, one million deaths and accounts of cannibalism did not make it look good. As was mentioned, it was not until the 1990s that this information became widely known. Unfortunately, most of the people who had survived the siege could not even talk about it with any openness until fifty years later.

Today, a huge open-air memorial, cemetery, and museum honor the dead of Leningrad and the sacrifices made to keep the city alive.



Illustration 17: Piskaryovskoe Memorial Cemetery honors the dead of Leningrad. Nearly 500,000 civilians and soldiers are buried here.

nclusion

The siege of Leningrad lasted for 872 days but is known to history as the “900 Days.” There are only a handful of survivors of the siege today, but they are honored every year by the parades in Russia that mark the end of WWII in Europe.

Though the siege was just one of the many costly battles of the war, one that was not even a “turning point,” such as the Battle of Moscow (1941), Stalingrad (1942–1943), and Kursk (1943), the siege of Leningrad symbolized more than just one city’s struggle for survival. It represented an entire country’s struggle against an enemy that was bent on exterminating its people and culture.

After the war was over and after Stalin died in 1953, the response of the government to other difficult times often included exhortations for the Soviet people to “show the Spirit of Leningrad”—in other words, to grit their teeth, bear whatever difficulties came their way, and win in the end.

As this is being written in the summer of 2020, with a pandemic sweeping the globe and over half a million dead worldwide because of it, perhaps it would be a good thing for us to remember the life-and-death struggle of the city of Leningrad, where one million people died in situations much worse than what we are facing today.

pendix A: Forces of Army Group North at the beginning of Barbarossa through July/August 1941

Army Group North • 18th Army, 4th Panzer Group, and 16th Army (deployed from north to south), with 29 divisions and approximately 712,000 personnel (total in the German Army, Waffen SS, Luftwaffe ground forces, naval ground forces in coastal artillery, and railroad troops). Approximately 562,000 personnel were allocated to Deployed (D) combat units (i.e., those units displayed in the German Deployment Matrix for Army Group North).

- 7 infantry corps HQs, 2 panzer (motorized) corps HQs, 1 army group rear area HQ, 20 infantry divisions, 3 panzer divisions, 2 motorized divisions, 1 Waffen SS motorized division, and 3 (small) security divisions.
- 770 fully tracked AFVs (armored Fighting Vehicles) of all types. This included 619 tanks, command tanks, and flame tanks. However, only 214 tanks and assault guns had 50-75mm caliber guns, and only 274 AFVs had guns with a caliber greater than 45mm.
- 213 armored cars of all types (including armored radio cars) and 344 semi-tracked AFVs (including APCs and armored observation vehicles).
- 3,980 (28-600mm) artillery pieces (including anti-tank guns and excluding coastal and rail guns and rocket systems), 735 (20-105mm) AA guns (including all SP AA guns), and 3,409 (50-81mm) mortars.
- Approximately 122,900 motor vehicles (excluding half-tracks, armored cars, and motorcycles), and 2,259 half-track prime movers (excluding half-tracks used as self-propelled guns).

pendix B: Soviet forces, first months of Barbarossa to late fall 1941

Leningrad Military District (Northern Front from June 24th)

- 14th Army (Murmansk area), 7th Army (Karelian area, Finland), 23rd Army (Leningrad area), with 21 divisions and 404,470 personnel in total.
- 3 rifle corps HQs, 15 rifle divisions, 2 mechanized corps HQs, 4 tank divisions, and 2 mechanized divisions.
- 1,857 tanks, 2,159 combat aircraft (including 823 VVS-VMF naval aircraft), 2,996 (45-305mm) artillery pieces (excluding coastal and rail guns), 1,228 (25-85mm) AA guns, 3,687 (50-120mm) mortars, and 28,759 motor vehicles of all types (but excluding artillery tractors).
- Commander: General-Lieutenant M.M. Popov.

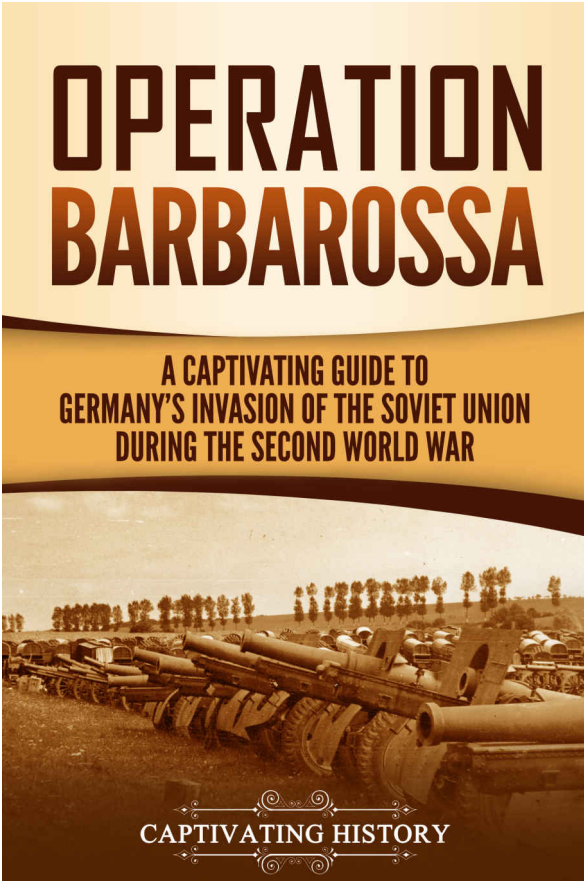
Baltic Special Military District (Northwestern Front from June 22nd)

- 8th Army (North Lithuania), 11th Army (South Lithuania), 27th Army (Pskov area), with 26 divisions and 369,702 personnel in total.
- 7 rifle corps HQs, 19 rifle divisions, 2 mechanized corps HQs, 4 tank divisions, 2 mechanized divisions, and 1 NKVD motorized rifle division.
- 1,551 tanks, 1,262 combat aircraft, 3,607 (45-305mm) artillery pieces, (excluding coastal and rail guns), 504 (25-85mm) AA guns, 2,969 (50-120mm) mortars, and 19,111 motor vehicles of all types (but excluding artillery tractors).
- Commander: General-Colonel F.I. Kuznetsov.

*Information courtesy “operationbarbarossa.net”

Part 4: Operation Barbarossa

A Captivating Guide to the Opening Months of the War between Hitler and the Soviet Union in 1941–45



Introduction

On June 22nd, 1941, Nazi Germany launched Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of the Soviet Union. In the time since the end of the war, the world has become familiar with the number of deaths sustained by the Soviet Union (also known as the USSR) during the conflict—twenty-million. And that’s likely low, given the size of the country, census taking at the time, and the damage done to the bureaucracy of the country. Think about it: twenty million people. That is a figure that is almost impossible to wrap one’s mind around. Nearly every family in the nation lost someone. The most celebrated and biggest holiday in the Soviet Union, now the nations of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus (the former Soviet republics that were most affected by the war) is May 8th, “Victory Day, ” which celebrates the USSR’s victory over Nazi Germany in what was called the Great Patriotic War, honoring the heroes and remembering those lost.

Geoffrey Roberts, a British historian of the Soviet Union in World War II, in his work, *Stalin’s Wars: From World War to Cold War, 1939-1953* (2006), attempted to tally the losses in terms of infrastructure, making them all the starker. During the Nazi invasion and occupation, the Soviet Union lost an estimated:

70,000 Soviet cities, towns, and villages

32,000 factories

6,000 hospitals

82,000 schools

43,000 libraries

Historian Jacob Pauwels and others found that the USSR did not regain its pre-war economic levels until the early/mid-1960s.

Adolf Hitler invaded the Soviet Union with over three million men. The Soviets had just under that number in the western section of their country to meet them, as well as millions more elsewhere, which was something Hitler did not count on and grossly underestimated.

The struggle between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany was one of the largest and deadliest conflicts of all time, a war of elimination between totalitarian nations led by two of the most ruthless leaders in the history of the world.

Chapter 1 – Nazis and Communists

In *Mein Kampf* (*My Struggle*), Hitler's political testament and "autobiography" (in quotes because much of what is written about his life was exaggerated or made up, especially his claim of poverty; his father was a big fish in a small town with a maid, a pension, a uniform, and respect), the future dictator of Germany repeatedly stated his belief that it was the destiny of the German nation to expand to the east.

Germany, after World War I and even today, is roughly the size of the American states of Washington and Oregon together. The population of those two states combined is about twelve million people. The population of Germany at the time of World War II was seventy million (today, it's eighty million). Hitler was not the only German-speaking person to hold the belief that Germany needed to secure *Lebensraum* ("living space") in order to thrive and survive in a crowded Europe with enemies on all sides. Indeed, along with the vicious anti-Semitism included within *Mein Kampf*, the idea of *Lebensraum* is the most mentioned and elaborated upon.

In the years before the war, many of those in other nations who had read Hitler's book and who saw him clearly for what he was repeatedly told anyone who was willing to listen that Hitler meant to start a war of expansion in the east, which might evolve into another world war. Chief among these people was one of the leading political figures of Great Britain and its future leader, Winston Churchill.

In the years before the previous world war, many Europeans (especially those in the larger and more powerful nations of France, the United Kingdom, Austria-Hungary, Germany, and Russia) held the belief that their nations needed to gain or hold onto territories and colonial empires in order to thrive. Though much of this late 19th-century imperialism was supported by an undercurrent of racial superiority, its aims were economic gains and the power and prestige that came with a large empire.

However, Germany, prior to World War I, had a sizable minority of politicians, writers, philosophers, and journalists who were beginning to gravitate to a vision of Germany and Germanic peoples (which included the British, Scandinavians, Dutch, etc.) as a "superior" race, noting both their economic and military power along with their outsized cultural influence. This "Germanic superiority" extended over the other peoples of Europe, especially to the Slavic nations of the east.

Hitler, along with many Germans, Austrians, and other Europeans, were not alone in holding these beliefs; they existed in the United States and Canada as well. In the years between World War I and World War II, these ideas combined with new advances in science to bring forth the new “science” of eugenics, the idea that it would be possible to medically weed out hereditary and other infirmities such as intellectual disabilities, epilepsy, alcoholism, etc. On its fringes, the field of eugenics included educated medical professionals and philosophers who believed that it would be possible to “breed out” such infirmities and encourage the procreation of individuals who were believed to be smarter, better-looking, more fit, and healthy. Once it was combined with the idea that Northern European Germanic peoples were superior, eugenics began to enter a new and dangerous phase by the time Hitler came to power.

(It should be noted that in the 1920s and even after World War II, the United States, Canada, and Sweden carried out forced sterilizations of people deemed “undesirable.” This began before Hitler took power in Germany and continued after his defeat.)

Additionally, in much of Europe (actually more so in Eastern Europe and Russia than in the West at this time), this idea of racial superiority combined with anti-Semitism, which had been the scourge of the Jewish population ever since the Romans forced the Jews from Israel centuries before, formed a dangerous new set of ideas, including the idea that a “master race” could be bred and “inferior” races could be eliminated.

The cataclysmic event that pushed many Germans and Austrians, where anti-Semitism, including obviously that of Hitler, was particularly virulent, was World War I. The German defeat in World War I shocked the population, and it deserves some attention because it foretold what was to come—especially its severity.

There were many factors leading to Germany’s defeat in the First World War. Among them was the power of the nations arrayed against them: France, Great Britain, Russia, Italy, and, from 1917, on, the United States.

Germany and, to a lesser extent Austria, its ally, were able to keep their enemies from actually invading their territory at the end of the war, but those in Germany with an intimate knowledge of the situation knew that it was just a matter of time before that happened. Their enemies were too powerful, and with the entry of the US into the war, the Allies were just getting more powerful by the week.

The two men in charge of the German war efforts in 1918 were Field Marshals Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff. Knowing that the war was lost, they purposely approached the leading opposition party in Germany, the Social Democratic Party (a democratic party with some socialist aspects to their platform) about going to the Allies to negotiate a peace. They knew that the Allies would not accept a peace offer from the German military but that they would from known opponents of the war.

This was partially true, but the field marshals' main motive was to take the onus of defeat/surrender off of the Imperial German Army and onto the politicians, especially left-wing politicians. In this, they succeeded. The Social Democratic diplomats negotiated with the Allies for a truce, which eventually, and unavoidably, turned into a German surrender.

Another factor that caused such a major shock to much of German society was that throughout the war, and to some extent before, the German press was tightly controlled by the government. Simply speaking, in the papers for every day for four years, the German populace was told they were winning the war and that victory was "just around the corner." This was especially true in the spring of 1918 when Field Marshal Ludendorff launched his Spring Offensive, which was designed to knock France and Britain out of the war before the full weight of American manpower and resources could be brought to bear on Germany.

At first, the Germans enjoyed spectacular successes, but eventually, the power of the Allies began to push the Germans back. Though no Allied troops were in Germany by the time the war ended on November 11th, 1918, the German Army was just days away from a full retreat—supplies were low, replacements were barely trained boys, and the number of those were quickly dwindling.

Though many Germans realized the situation was dire, many chose to keep their rose-colored glasses on and believe that victory was still near. Then, suddenly, Germany surrendered.

By the time the Treaty of Versailles was signed the next summer, a story had already begun that the German Army had been "stabbed in the back" by enemies from within. Among those "enemies" were already unpopular groups, such as the communists and the Jewish and, to a lesser extent, left-leaning people in other parties, mainly the Social Democrats.

Under the Treaty of Versailles, the German armed forces, one of the pillars of German society, was limited to 100,000 men. Millions of men were no

longer allowed to pursue a military career.

Germany was also forced to cede the long-disputed territory of Alsace-Lorraine to France and to give up the territory it had won in Russia. Making it worse, the “new” country of Poland, long divided by Germany, Russia, and Austria-Hungary, was born, and it took up much of what used to be German territory, actually separating the state of Prussia from the rest of the country.

On top of all this, the Germans were also required to pay a huge amount in reparations to the Allies and, to add insult to injury, accept the blame for starting the war, which was not entirely true. As you might imagine, all of this gave birth to much resentment (actually, resentment might be too mild), which only grew with time. Not to mention, it was aggravated by the economic hardships of the post-war period, which included the onset of the Great Depression in 1929.

Throughout all of this, Hitler’s *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (National Socialist German Workers’ Party, better known as the Nazi Party, called this for the pronunciation of the first part of the first word in German) waxed and waned in influence and power. As Germany’s economic situation worsened during the Great Depression, more and more people began to join the party, literally and tacitly. Throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s, the resentments in Germany grew, and the blame for Germany’s problems was placed squarely on the Jews and the communists. Many of Europe’s and the world’s communist parties were controlled, or at least influenced, by Stalin’s Soviet Union.

Josef Stalin certainly did try to destabilize the governments and societies of Europe in the hope that the uncertain economic times of the immediate post-war years, as well as during the Great Depression in 1929, would encourage the workers and peasants of Europe to unite and overthrow the capitalist systems in place there. Of course, if that happened, Stalin fully intended to play the role of a puppet master.

By the late 1920s, Stalin had risen to completely control the Soviet Union. He used political favors, threats, and incredible repression (executions, forced labor, labor camps, etc.) to maintain this power. And though the statistics coming out of the Soviet Union were greatly inflated, by the time World War II began, he had turned the Soviet Union into an industrial powerhouse. He also built the Soviet Union’s Red Army into one of the largest fighting forces on the planet.

In early 1933, Hitler came to power in Germany and launched a bold yet careful plan to both regain Germany's lost territories and rearm the armed forces, which would violate the Treaty of Versailles. One of his first orders of business was to outlaw all opposition parties and to jail or execute the members of the Communist Party of Germany, the largest communist party outside of the USSR at the time.

Ironically, while he was doing this, Hitler was also reaching agreements with Stalin and the Soviets to secretly train elements of the future German armed forces in the Soviet Union. This had begun in secret by the German military before Hitler, but he continued it and enlarged the program, obviously with the agreement of Stalin.

Despite being ideological enemies, both Hitler and Stalin were pragmatists. Hitler supplied machine parts and other goods to Stalin, and in return, he got a place to rebuild the German military in secret. Stalin aimed to set in play a series of machinations that would turn Hitler against France and Britain rather than his country, which would allow the USSR to build an army with which to defend itself from a resurgent Germany. Stalin, for the most part, believed that Germany and the Soviet Union would war against each other; he just hoped he could control the timing of the conflict.

Hitler began his program to reassert Germany's power in 1936. First, he remilitarized the Rhineland. He then annexed Austria in 1938. Later that year and at the start of 1939, he manipulated the French and British into abandoning Czechoslovakia in the interests of peace and took over that nation as well. He formed alliances with Hungary and Romania, as well as Benito Mussolini's Italy and Emperor Hirohito's Japan. Soon, Stalin realized that Hitler and his allies had him surrounded.

When Hitler threatened and cajoled the Western Allies over Czechoslovakia, Stalin was actually willing to face down Germany, but only if Britain and France showed some resolve. When they did not, he came to believe that not only would they not be able to withstand Hitler but that he had also better come to terms with the Nazi leader before it was too late.

As Germany put pressure on Poland, which was step one in Hitler's desire to expand eastward, the Soviets and Germans began putting out diplomatic feelers. Hitler wanted to invade Poland without provoking a war with the USSR, as he did not believe Germany was ready to take on the Soviet

Union. Stalin wanted to reassert Russian control over Poland and to gain a buffer zone between himself and Hitler.

An agreement was beneficial for both, so on August 23rd, 1939, the two totalitarian powers signed a non-aggression pact. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (named after the foreign ministers of the USSR and Germany, respectively) openly declared that Hitler and Stalin would not go to war with each other. It also announced a variety of trade agreements and diplomatic protocols. Those were just the open announcements. Secretly, Stalin and Hitler agreed to divide Poland between them as Germany (or rather, the German-speaking state of Prussia) and Russia had for centuries. It also gave Stalin a free hand to take control of the Baltic states and part of Romania, and the pact assured Stalin that Hitler would not interfere if the USSR attacked Finland, with whom Stalin was having border issues.

On the surface, it seemed as if Stalin got the better of the bargain, but what Hitler really wanted was a large chunk of Poland and an assurance that the Soviet Union would not attack him when he turned to wage war on France, the planning of which was already in the works.

Hitler attacked Poland on September 1st, 1939. Within four weeks, the Germans were in the Polish capital of Warsaw. Stalin sent in the Red Army on September 17th. By the end of the month, Poland ceased to exist, and the German and Soviet troops made big shows of congratulating each other all along the agreed stopping line. Very quickly, German machine parts and industrial goods started traveling east as Russian raw materials flowed into Germany.



Illustration 1: German and Soviet officers meet in Poland, September 1939

In November, Stalin ordered the Red Army to attack Finland. He wanted a greater buffer between the Finnish border and the Soviet's "second city" and home of the Bolshevik Revolution, Leningrad (today's St. Petersburg). Stalin was worried that at some point in the future, Hitler would ally himself with the Finns, who had a long history of antagonism toward the Russians.

Though Stalin eventually got what he wanted, as the Finns were forced to cede substantial chunks of territory to the Soviets, the Red Army's campaign in Finland, though short, was costly in both money and human life. Eventually, the Soviets' weight of numbers showed through, but the Finns had outfought the Red Army at nearly every turn until they became too exhausted and were forced into negotiations.

The Red Army Purges of the 1930s

The common belief is that Hitler and many others saw the Red Army as incompetent in their Finnish campaign. This is true, to a large extent, and it helped Hitler reach his decision to invade the USSR in 1941. However, many in Germany and around the world saw only what they wanted to see—a brutish and poorly led Red Army that relied on numbers to win. However, toward the end of the Winter War against the Finns, the Soviets

stopped and reorganized, retrained, and replaced incompetent leaders with, for the most part, more able ones. This ability to bend and not break, along with surprising adaptability, would happen in the latter part of the Soviets' war with Hitler. But though the Soviets were able to reorganize enough to defeat Finland, their forces still suffered from some glaring weaknesses. First and foremost, in the beginning of 1937, Stalin began a series of purges in order to solidify his already immense power. Though many segments of Soviet society suffered, it is the purge of the Red Army that concerns us here.

There is a debate among historians about why Stalin began the purges. Some believe it was simply his paranoia, for if a threat to his power arose (which there is no evidence there was), it would be among the officers of the Red Army. Others believe that Stalin and those close to him thought that many of the officers of the Red Army, particularly those who were promoted after the Bolshevik Revolution, were not as dedicated to communist ideals as they should have been. Among the party leadership, there was the belief that the armed forces did not need to spend much money on training a ton of officers, as "revolutionary zeal" would carry the day on the battlefield.

The man in charge of the Red Army in 1937 was the popular Mikhail Tukhachevsky, who led troops in the Bolshevik Revolution and the Russian Civil War and who was attempting to modernize the Red Army to bring it in line with modern ideas. Some believe that Stalin was jealous of Tukhachevsky's popularity and wished to eliminate him and his allies as they were possible rivals.

In 1937, Stalin's purge of the Red Army began. Of 80,000 officers, 37,000 were either killed outright, sent to Siberian labor camps to die, or jailed. Only a small number survived; some were later reinstated when it became clear to Stalin that experienced officers were needed to deal with Hitler's invasion. The numbers of casualties vary, as records were destroyed, altered, or hidden by the regime during the war as well as afterward, making it difficult to get exact numbers.

The purge was worse at the top, but it made its way down into the company level. At the top, three of the five Marshals of the Soviet Union were executed. And the list goes on: thirteen of fifteen generals of the army, eight of nine admirals, nearly 90 percent of corps commanders, 82 percent of all

the division generals—and this was just at the top. Colonels, majors, and captains were removed as well, though at a lesser rate.

Making things worse was Stalin's purge of the political commissars attached to the armed forces. Even before the purge, the commissars made the efficient functioning of a modern army almost impossible. Down to the company level, commanders had a political shadow making sure that their commands were sufficiently in line with the ideas of the Communist Party. This meant time set aside for important training had to be used for indoctrinating men in Stalinist thought and communist teachings. The commissars also ensured that commanders followed orders, especially those given that included mass charges or other suicidal tactics in the belief that "zeal" would win the day. Officers who made a regular habit of opposing their commissars ran the risk of discipline, dismissal, or death.

In order to ensure complete loyalty among future commissars, from 1937 to 1938, the top echelon of political commissars (those attached to the staffs of marshals and generals) were eliminated. As in the rest of the army, these eliminations or dismissals usually meant a slow death in the Gulag, the Soviet system of labor/concentration camps.

By 1939, when the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was signed, the vast majority of the officers in the Red Army did not dare waver from the instructions given from the top. In the event that no instructions were given, the officers did not dare take matters into their own hands and figure out what was best to do—they were paralyzed with fear.

Stalin may have begun to realize the damage these purges had wrought when the Red Army suffered humiliation after humiliation in the war against Finland. Despite a three to one advantage in troops (the Red Army in total outnumbered the Finns by ten to one or more), the Finns lacking any serious heavy artillery, and the Soviets' possession of thousands of tanks to the Finns' mere 32, the Red Army struggled, in part because of its reliance on throwing wave after wave of men at the Finns with little regard to casualties.

As was mentioned earlier, Stalin and his generals finally realized things needed to change, and in the last month of the war, training and new tactics allowed the Soviets to advance and force the Finns to the negotiating table.

The German Army's Flexibility

In contrast to the Soviet system, the German Army under Hitler was surprisingly flexible. Before the unification of Germany, the people of the

various German-speaking states all had their own military forces, but the most powerful was that of Prussia, the eastern German state, which became the core around which the German Empire was built in 1871.

The Prussian military, though small, was one of the first modern standing professional armies. Most other European nations had a small cadre of officers and a national guard, which often doubled as a police force. However, in times of war, troops had to be drafted, organized, and trained. More often than not, they were given far less training than was needed.

By contrast, beginning in the early 18th century, the Prussian kings organized a professional army whose sole purpose was the defense of the realm. Though comparatively small, the Prussians rotated men in and out of the army, so even those not officially in the ranks had enough training to act on the battlefield if the need arose immediately. This meant that, generally speaking, the Prussian Army was able to ready itself and move to attack or defend itself much quicker than its rivals. This system remained in place when Germany was born in 1871.

Prussian, and later German, training was notoriously strict and difficult, and though recruits were trained to obey orders instantly, there was also a kind of flexibility inherent in the Prussian/German system that was not present in other nations. The top of the chain of command set goals and timetables, but as orders filtered through the system, each successive group of commanders was allowed to act with flexibility in order to achieve those goals.

So, for example, the field marshals at the top might decide when an offensive would begin, its force allocation, timetable, general movements of armies, and their respective objectives/responsibilities. Down the ladder, army group commanders and the armies and divisions within that group would be given assignments, but it was up to the commanders as to how they would achieve their goals. This held true down to the company, platoon, and even the squad level on occasion. Adding to this flexibility, which allowed innovative techniques to be discovered much more often than in other armies, was the idea that each officer below trained for the job above him. So, division commanders trained as army commanders, regimental commanders as division command, etc. Even sergeants were familiar with the job of lieutenant. This meant that if the officer above them fell, the non-commissioned officer could be quickly promoted, allowing the battle to move forward without as many complications.

Ironically, during the course of World War II, as the tides of war turned, it was the Germans who became less flexible (at least on a divisional level and up) and the Soviets who became more flexible and innovative.

Balance of Forces

In 1942, Adolf Hitler was secretly recorded in a conversation with Finnish Field Marshal Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim. The two had met for Mannerheim's birthday and to discuss the progress of the war, which Finland had entered into on the side of Germany in 1941. In a surprisingly candid and conversational way, Hitler talks about the results of Operation Barbarossa, telling Mannerheim that he and his intelligence apparatus had grossly underestimated the size of the Soviet armed forces and the industrial might that had helped to create it.

Sitting in a train car in Finland, Hitler told Mannerheim that, among other things, "If someone had told me that a country could start with 35,000 tanks, then I'd have said, 'You are crazy!' If one of my generals had stated that any nation had 35,000 tanks, I'd have said: 'You, my good sir, you see everything twice or ten times. You are crazy, you are seeing ghosts.'"

Hitler also goes on to admit that his army was not built for winter and that he had pinned his hopes on a swift victory. Despite all of this, though, Hitler goes on to say that even if he had known about the size of the Red Army and its industrial base, he would have attacked anyway based on how the Red Army performed in the Winter War with Finland and on his belief that he would eventually be involved in a war with the USSR, a war in which he wished to strike first.

What Hitler did not know was the extent of Soviet military spending. Though the USSR was poor compared to the richer Western European countries, throughout the late 1920s and 1930s, it had spent an increasing share of its national budget on defense. From 1927 to 1928, Stalin had spent about 10 percent of the nation's budget on the military. This percentage increased every year until the outbreak of the war, which first started with Finland in 1939. For comparison, in 1933, the Soviets spent 16 percent on defense spending; in 1938, it amounted to over 43 percent of the budget.

What follows is a basic and general run-down of the balance of forces for the Soviets and the *Wehrmacht* (German Armed Forces) when Operation Barbarossa started on June 22nd, 1941, on the Soviet border.

On the 1,800-mile-long border, Hitler had 153 (+/-5) divisions equaling 3.5 million men. In addition to those men were nineteen Panzer (tank)

divisions, numbering around 6,000 tanks and other armored vehicles. Seven thousand artillery pieces of varying sizes thundered over the landscape that morning, along with over 7,000 mortars of varying sizes. These were accompanied by 3,000 to 5,000 aircraft. The German force was supplemented by thirty or so Finnish, Italian, Romanian, and Hungarian formations, totaling about thirty divisions of widely varied strength and effectiveness. This was the largest invasion force in world history—that is until the Soviets went on the offensive in late 1942/early 1943.

Opposing the Germans was a huge mass of Soviet infantry, but their effectiveness varied widely. The Soviets had approximately 2.5 to 2.9 million men on the front lines that morning and in the coming days. The Soviets had 11,000 tanks in the western part of the country and in Poland, outnumbering the Germans about two or three to one, depending on the sources of information. Airplanes, including fighters, bombers, recon, and transport, numbered between 8,000 to 10,000, but these were largely obsolete. The Soviets possessed an amazing array of artillery, as they would throughout the war. In the front-line zone, they had approximately 33,000 guns, but unfortunately, they lacked the vehicles needed to tow them. In the mobile battle to come, these guns were often captured or destroyed by the Red Army to prevent them from being used by the rapidly moving Germans.

What may come as a surprise to some of you reading this is the strength of the Soviet armored forces. The Red Army possessed a staggering number of tanks at the beginning of the war, and some of them were quite good—actually, two models, in particular, were perhaps the best in the world for a short time. We will discuss the T-34 and the KV series shortly, but for the most part, the numbers of the Soviet armored forces were boosted by a tremendous number of armored cars and obsolete and somewhat experimental tanks.

The BT-10 was a lightly armored car designed as a scout/recon vehicle and for urban/crowd control whose armor was just over half an inch at its thickest. Though it mounted a 45 mm gun, which was a heavy caliber for its chassis, the vehicle was useless on the battlefield unless it was against unescorted infantry with no anti-tank weapons.

Then came a series of light and medium tanks, most of which had been designed in the mid-1930s. Thousands of T-27s and T-28s were built and used in the Soviet invasion of eastern Poland. There, they proved somewhat

effective, as most of the quality Polish units had moved west to fight the Nazis. However, in the Winter War against the Finns, the Soviet tanks were found to be vulnerable to anti-tank fire and Molotov cocktails, flammable liquid bombs used by the Finns to make up for their lack of anti-tank guns. It didn't help that the Soviets thought their tanks would be suited perfectly to fight in the war against the Finns. Near the start of World War II, the Soviets up-armored these tanks, which helped to a degree. Another factor that deluded the Soviets into thinking their tanks were capable was their victory over the Japanese in Mongolia, where the Japanese provoked an "incident" that led to a large battle at Khalkhin Gol. This was deceptive, however, for, among all of the major combatants of WWII, the Japanese tanks were the worst.

There was also the T-35 "land battleship," which was more in line with WWI-thinking than WWII. The T-35 was a huge machine with multiple turrets and a crew of eleven. Its heaviest gun was a good 76.2 model combined with a host of machine guns and two 45 mm guns. Its top speed, which could only be rarely used for its use of fuel, was 19 miles per hour. The tank was almost 32 feet long and weighed 44 tons, making it liable to sink in the mud and almost impossible to get over most of the primitive bridges in the Soviet countryside. Plenty of pictures exist of German soldiers examining this oddity on the battlefield after they had been knocked out or abandoned.



Illustration 2: German soldiers pose on T-35, fall 1941

The Soviets had also purchased a number of British tanks before the war, but most of these were obsolete by the time World War II began.

However, the Red Army began turning out two excellent tank models beginning in 1940. These were the Kliment Voroshilov (named for the Soviet marshal of the same name) 1 and 2. The KV-2 is the more well-known of the two, with its huge profile and awkward-looking and heavily armored turret, but the KV-1 was a beast itself and proved to be a challenge for the Germans when they met it on the battlefield.

The KV-1 sported 90 mm front armor with 75 mm sides and 70 mm rear armor—in other words, it was a well-protected tank. It carried an excellent 76.2 mm main gun, which was heavier than all German tank guns at the time of Operation Barbarossa, and three to four 7.62 mm machine guns. Its tracks were wider than previous Soviet tanks, which allowed it, and the more famous T-34, to operate in mud and snow much more successfully than other Soviet and German tanks. The height of the KV-1 was just over eight feet, or twelve feet if one includes the turret.

The KV-2 was almost sixteen feet high including its turret, but its turret and front armor were (or approached) 110 mm/4.3 inches. Its main gun was an artillery gun of 152 mm/5.9 inches (its main purpose was mobile artillery).

Its main weakness, though, was its lack of speed, although its armor somewhat made up for this.

Both versions of the KV tanks proved to be a shock to the Germans and Finns on the field, and many German battlefield reports and diaries, such as the one below, which comes from a soldier in the 1st Panzer Division on the second day of the invasion, are filled with accounts of how much damage these vehicles could take.

Our companies opened fire from 700 m (765 yd). We got closer and closer... Soon we were only about 50-100 m (55-110 yd) from each other. A fantastic engagement opened up—without any German progress. The Soviet tanks continued their advance and our armor-piercing projectiles simply bounced off. The Soviet tanks withstood point-blank fire from both our 50 mm (1.97 in) and 75 mm (2.95 in) guns. A KV-2 was hit more than 70 times and not a single round penetrated. A very few Soviet tanks were immobilized and eventually destroyed as we managed to shoot at their tracks, and then brought up artillery to hammer them at close range. It was then attacked at close range with satchel charges.

Until the Germans began to field their 88 mm anti-aircraft guns as an anti-tank weapon, the best that the German gunners could hope for was a lucky hit on a faulty area of armor or to disable the tank by hitting its tracks. In close-combat situations, satchel charges (as mentioned above) might disable the tank, but that took extraordinary courage.

Lastly, the Soviets developed the ground-breaking T-34. Seeing the success of lighter German tanks in Poland, France, and the Low Countries in 1940, the Soviets rushed plans that were already on the drawing board to the production line. The result was the T-34/40. “T” stood for “tank,” “34” for the year that designer Mikhail Koshkin had developed his idea for the tank, and “40” for the year it entered production. Later versions were called T-34/76 and 85, but they were not by the Soviets; this was a German name for tanks with those gun sizes.

The T-34 was honestly not a great tank. It was just a very good one, and it was very good at nearly everything. It had speeds of 53 km/33 mph. Its gun was a high velocity 76 mm gun, capable of penetrating all German tanks in 1941 at a distance. Its wide tracks allowed it to move well in muddy or wet soil, and it was not too heavy for most serious bridges. Its diesel engine was simple, reliable (which the KVs were not), and easy to repair. The profile of

the tank was not too high, and best of all, it used cast armor in most places as opposed to the riveted armor used on most tanks in most countries of that time.

Cast armor meant that large sections of the tank's armor were made in one piece. Where the pieces met, they were welded together rather than riveted, making them much stronger. Additionally, rivets had a nasty habit of being jarred loose by anti-tank rounds, turning them into large chunks of shrapnel flying inside the tank, even if the shell did not penetrate it.

The armor itself was sloped, which was yet another innovation. This meant that added strength was given to the armor, as a round would actually have to penetrate further on sloped armor, which had the same thickness as non-sloped armor. Sloping also meant that anti-tank rounds were often deflected upward rather than penetrating the tank. Though the T-34's armor was not as thick as that of the KV series, early WWII German tank and anti-tank guns often could not penetrate the outer hull of the T-34, especially at a distance. Captured T-34s were carefully examined by the Germans, and as a result, and with some modifications, the Panzer Mark V Panther was developed.

German Tanks

In the years between World War I and World War II, the Germans had also been working on new tank designs. Though the Treaty of Versailles forbade Germany to possess anything except lightly protected armored cars for riot/crowd control duty, some generals and other officers, both those on active duty and those forced into civilian life by the treaty, constantly worked for the day that Germany would be able to rearm.

By 1929/30, when the Great Depression was at the forefront of the minds of the great powers of the West, and after more than a decade had passed since World War I, the Allied observation of the German military had become lax. Many in Britain and the United States (and, to a lesser degree, France) had come to believe that the terms of the Treaty of Versailles weighed too heavily on Germany. Also, at a time when capitalism seemed to be under threat, the Allies were well aware that Stalin and his communist allies in Europe were waiting for their moment to seize power. As Germany was the only nation able to take on the Soviet Union in that area of the world, many British and Americans began to see a renewed German Army as a bulwark against communism, and so, they often looked the other way as the Germans made plans to rearm.

Interestingly enough, much of their planning took place away from the prying eyes of the Allies: it took place in the Soviet Union, as was mentioned earlier. However, these secret training bases were focused more on training pilots and developing an air force, something which concerned the British and Americans, as fighters and bombers weren't hindered by the sea like tanks and machine guns.

German tank planning and engineering took place on private drawing boards throughout the country. A small number of German troops practiced tank warfare with plywood and cardboard cutouts that they carried as they ran around training fields. Western newsreel cameras made fun of this, but many of the men running about would become the same tank commanders that were the spearhead of the blitzkrieg ("lightning war") tactics, which overwhelmed most of Europe in 1939 and 1940. Despite its comical appearance, this training went a long way toward learning a new type of tank warfare in which the tank became its own devastating weapon, driving deep behind enemy lines in large, powerful armored columns rather than in small infantry-support groups where their firepower and maneuverability were effectively reduced.



When the Germans invaded the USSR in June 1941, they did so with an estimated 6,000 armored vehicles. The bulk of the German tanks were Panzer Mark Is and IIs, both of which were obsolete even before the war began in Poland in 1939. The Mark I was more of a turreted armored car than a tank, though it had treads. Its armor was thin and riveted, and it was armed with only two 7.92 mm machine guns, which were mounted in the turret. It had no cannons whatsoever. The vehicle was good for putting down lightly armed civil insurrections, and that was about it. Its thickest

armor was half an inch thick, and that was just in the front. The tank was susceptible to even the smallest caliber anti-tank guns. As the war went on, the thousands of Mark Is were gradually modified; many of them had their turrets removed, and their chassis were able to carry a variety of guns as “tank destroyers” and mobile artillery.

The Panzer Mark II was a slight improvement. German military observers and intelligence agents in other countries, particularly France, reported that many of the tanks they were seeing were significantly better than the Germans. The Germans began a crash course in building better tanks, but as a stopgap, they constructed the Mark II, which was made by the same factories that made the Mark I. The most significant difference between the two tanks was the 20 mm/2 cm guns the Mark II carried as opposed to the machine guns of the Mark I. The Mark II also had a hull-mounted 7.92 mm machine gun for defense against infantry. The tank could easily be destroyed by most Allied anti-tank guns.

As the Mark Is and IIs were making their way through Poland, German engineers were busy designing an up-to-date tank for the *Wehrmacht*. This was the Mark III, which became the workhorse of the German Army, going through a number of modifications (mostly increases in armor protection and larger, longer cannon) throughout the conflict. A total of nearly 6,000 Mark III variants were built in 1943, and many of the survivors saw duty in various Eastern European countries after the war.

So, if the German tanks were actually not as good as many of the Allied tanks they faced, particularly at the start of the war, why do we consider the Germans the masters of armored warfare during World War II? Well, war is more than just equipment: it’s also about training, leadership, discipline, and tactics.

But what were the tactics that allowed the Germans to surprise and overwhelm their enemies in the first two years of the war? Broken down to its most basic form, the blitzkrieg consisted of a variety of elements all working together. Firstly, weak points in the enemy’s defenses would be found. Strong points would be avoided, maneuvered around, or simply held in place by a feinting attack. Then, a strong armored column, working in close conjunction with massive concentrated air attacks, would drive through the weak points of the enemy’s front, penetrating to the rear to cut off supplies, interrupt communication, and sow confusion. German infantry

would then drive through the hole broken open by the tanks and air support to mop up and surround enemy units still at the front. On many occasions, especially in the more open fields of Poland and Russia, tank formations would keep driving until they reached their goals or were in danger of outrunning their supply trains.

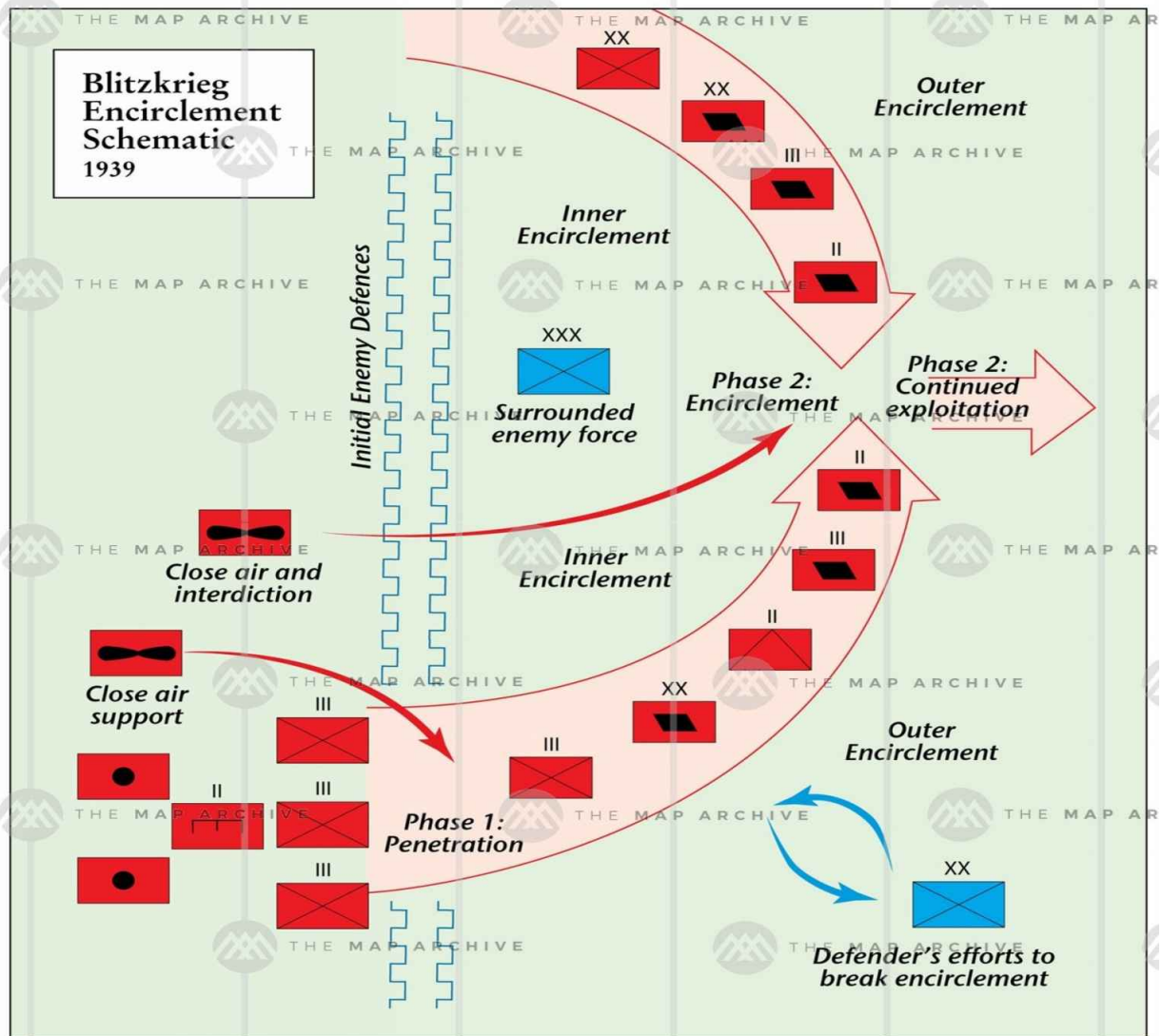


Illustration 3: Diagram of theoretical blitzkrieg-type breakthrough of WWII (courtesy The Map Archive)

German tactics also called for the use of airpower acting in close coordination with armored and infantry units on the ground. This called for a high level of skill that the Soviets did not possess at this point. Adding to the strength of the German attack was their complete superiority in the air. Though the Soviets possessed many more planes than the Nazis, the vast

majority were obsolete when the war began, and many of those were in a state of disrepair. Later in the war, the Soviets fielded a number of decent fighters and dive bombers (especially the famed Ilyushin Il-2 dive bomber, which was the scourge of German tank formations later in the war), but almost until the day the war ended, the German kills of Soviet aircraft were much, much higher than Soviet destruction of German planes.

The Soviets had seen the German tactics at work in Poland in 1939 and in the West in the summer of 1940, but in the summer of 1941, they still did not have an effective counter to German battlefield tactics. They hoped that their troops in Poland would be able to hold them back at least long enough for the complete mobilization of the Red Army and that the weight of Soviet equipment and manpower would be able to grind the Germans down.

Chapter 2 – Invasion

On the night of June 21st, 1941, a German soldier named Alfred Liskow, who had been a member of the Communist Party of Germany before Hitler, swam across the Bug River in Poland and defected to the Soviets. He warned them that the German Army was under orders to attack the Soviets the next morning. The warning went unheeded, though a few weeks later, Liskow allegedly broadcast propaganda to the Soviet people that many Germans did not want a fight with the Soviet Union. His fate is unclear, although he was likely executed on Stalin's orders in 1942.

Many warnings about Hitler's intentions went unheeded by Stalin. Flights by German planes, which were clearly reconnaissance planes, were ordered to be left unmolested by Stalin as he did not want to provoke an "incident," as he believed the Red Army was unready for a fight. His military intelligence staff warned him an attack was imminent, and so did many of his generals, who were clearly taking their lives in their hands to do so. Even Winston Churchill, who was privy to much of Germany's thinking and actions through his intelligence and code-breaking services, warned the Soviets that an invasion was coming—and soon. Stalin ignored Churchill, believing the Englishman to be attempting to provoke him into attacking Germany and taking the pressure off Britain.

But perhaps most significantly, Stalin ignored reports from one of his agents in Japan, Richard Sorge, who was privy to information from diplomatic circles in Tokyo. Sorge reported in late May that he believed Hitler would attack the USSR in late June. He learned this from a German officer in Tokyo that he had befriended. Sorge was also sleeping with the German officer's wife, and she provided him with additional intelligence. All of this information he sent to Moscow, which was ignored. Fortunately for the Soviets, Stalin believed Sorge in late 1941 when Sorge informed Moscow that Japan had no intention of attacking the USSR and would go to war with the US instead, allowing Stalin to bring massive numbers of men and materials west from the Russian Far East to fight the Nazis at the gates of Moscow.

Sorge, among other spies and intelligence officials, Churchill, and Alfred Liskow were right: on June 21st, German commanders received the message that Unternehmen (Undertaking/Operation) Barbarossa would begin the next morning. The operation was named after medieval German Holy

Roman Emperor Friedrich Barbarossa (Frederick I, “Red Beard”), who is, according to legend, not dead but just sleeping, ready to awake and lead Germany to greatness in its hour of need.

Just after 3 a.m., thousands of German guns opened fire along an 1,800-mile-long front, which was, at the time, the largest artillery barrage in history, though that would be surpassed many times over during the war. Three million German troops and their allies poured over the borders in Poland, the Baltic states, Ukraine, and in the north bordering Finland. Though Soviet units had been sent an alert two hours before, word was slow getting to them, if it got there at all, and virtually none of the Red Army formations at the front was ready for the German onslaught.

The German fighter planes attacked Soviet airbases near the front line, destroying much of the Soviet air forces on the ground. German bombers attacked targets all along the border and deep into the USSR, striking targets as far as the Leningrad suburbs and Odesa in Ukraine.

In Moscow, Josef Stalin was completely destroyed by the news of the German attack. For a man as paranoid as the Soviet leader, it seems he believed that Hitler would not attack, at least not for the foreseeable future. Stalin went into a deep depression, which lasted for a number of days, and at one point, he believed that he might be arrested by his secret police and/or military for underestimating the threat Hitler posed. That morning, Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov went on the air and attempted to rally the Soviet people, as Stalin was incapable of speaking. Stalin did not go on the air until July 3rd, which was when he announced the start of the Great Patriotic War. He also slowly began to open churches and bring back previously forbidden military symbols (like the gold braid) and other old traditions in an effort to rally the people and make the war less about communism and more about national survival.

In a way, Stalin was right. World War II in the Soviet Union, as well as Poland, was the most savage war the world had seen since the Mongol invasions of the 13th and 14th centuries. Hitler told those in his inner circle that the war against the Soviet Union was to be a “war of annihilation,” eliminating not just the communist system (which, among other things, championed the unity of all the working classes, regardless of race) but also the entire population of the Soviet Union, especially the Jews, of which there was an estimated five million. The Slavic people of the Soviet Union were to be starved or worked to death for the benefit of the Germans. Those

permitted to exist were to be kept purposefully ignorant and barely alive to prevent uprisings.

On the heels of the invading troops, echelons of the *Schutzstaffel* (SS) and police units called *Einsatzgruppen* or “special action groups” fanned out to round up and/or kill Jews, Communist Party officials, the intelligentsia (writers, teachers, journalists, etc.), and others deemed a danger by the Nazis. Of course, the Jewish community was the primary target, and a year before the first extermination camps were organized, the *Einsatzgruppen* killed an estimated 1.5 million people in what has been recently termed the “Holocaust by bullets.”

In just weeks, the Germans had penetrated hundreds of miles into the Soviet Union. Poland and the Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia were taken in days, and by July 2nd, the Germans were at the Stalin Line, a line of defenses outside Leningrad. Hitler, Joseph Goebbels, Heinrich Himmler, and others down the chain of Nazi command were, given the extent of German successes in the summer of 1941, exultant and prepared plans for the German colonization of the Soviet Union from Archangelsk in the far north to the Ural Mountains to the Caspian Sea.

Indeed, in the first few weeks, it appeared as if the Red Army would either be eliminated in the field, taken prisoner, or disintegrate. Huge pockets of Soviet troops were surrounded in what historians have termed “the great encirclement battles of 1941.” The blitzkrieg worked amazingly well, just as it had in the West.

In battles both large and small, Soviet units were encircled and destroyed. Though conventional military theory says that an attacker should enjoy at least a two to one advantage, the attacker does have the advantage of deciding where to attack, and in keeping with blitzkrieg tactics, the Germans, generally speaking, pushed their armored spearheads against areas of the Soviet lines that were less well-defended, had gaps in the lines, or were manned by less able, less equipped, or poorly trained troops, or some combination of the three. Two prongs of the German forces would meet after penetrating miles behind Soviet front-line troops, completing an encirclement of the Red Army forces. Sometimes, a double envelopment, or a pincer movement, would occur, in which elements of the German forces would continue to drive on, hoping to then catch reinforcing Soviet units in another encirclement.

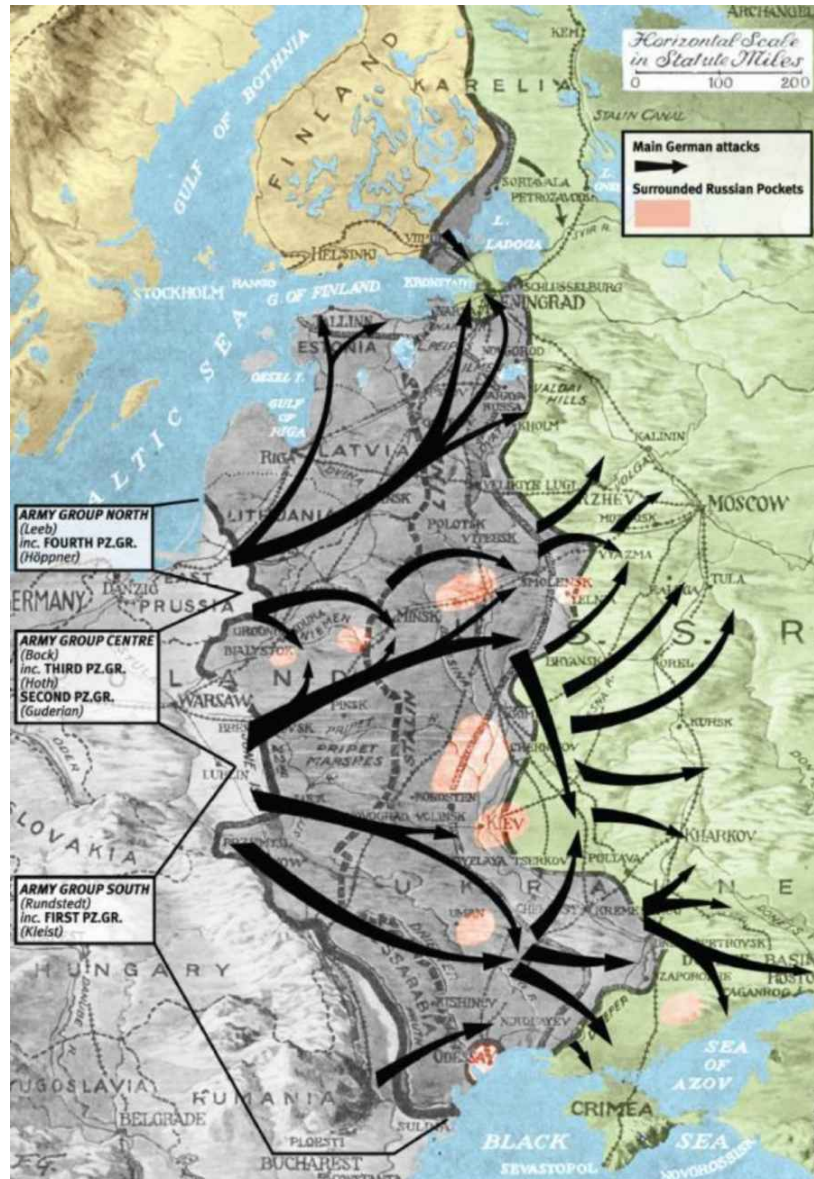


Illustration 4: German advances in December 1941

As you can see on the map above, these encirclements happened on both a small scale and a large one. If you look at the thrust of Germany’s “Army Group Centre,” you will see a series of arrows hundreds of miles apart coming together after driving deep into Soviet territory. On a smaller unit scale, this happened hundreds of times.

Initially, the Soviets were not only hampered by the Germans’ tactics and power, especially in the air, but also by the instructions they were getting from Moscow. Because of the purges, Soviet officers were loath to take initiative: if they made the wrong choices, they might end up before a firing squad. Sometimes, the instructions battlefield commanders did receive were

so out of touch or out of date that they were irrelevant to what the commanders were facing. Delays caused by German interruptions to Soviet communications, hesitation on the part of Soviet soldiers up and down the chain of command to relay bad news, and indecision at the top made a coordinated Red Army response almost impossible.

In the initial hours of the invasion, Stalin issued an order for Soviet troops to counterattack wherever possible, and that was essentially the gist of the order—no specifics were given, and no coordination between units happened. Commanders were simply ordered to attack whatever Germans they could with whatever troops they had. Knowing that a firing squad was virtually assured for anyone who disobeyed orders, hundreds of fruitless and fatal Soviet attacks took place. These battles were more like a boxing match in which one of the contestants is the heavyweight champ while the other is some guy off the street.

Panic spread throughout the country. People near the front lines attempted to flee, but on many occasions, they found themselves surrounded like the Red Army troops that were supposed to defend them. Columns full of thousands of people were bombed by the German Air Force, the *Luftwaffe*.

On the southern part of the front, in Ukraine, the Germans were often welcomed as liberators. Many older Ukrainians remembered the German occupation of World War I, in which the Germans acted with restraint and even respect. Others in the country had a deep abiding hatred of Stalin and the Soviet system, which had ruthlessly suppressed Ukrainian nationalism during and after the Russian Civil War, which took place between 1918 and 1921. Worse still, Stalin had deliberately deprived Ukraine of food during the years of 1932 and 1933, resulting in a man-made famine that was only aided by a natural disaster, which killed at least a million people in Ukraine, most of them ethnic Ukrainians. Of course, many hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians fought against the German invasion, but throughout the country, mobs greeted the invading German troops with the traditional gifts of welcome—bread and salt—and garlanded them with flowers.

This welcome by the Ukrainians encouraged the Nazis to believe that it was only a short matter of time before the Soviet system, under pressure from the outside and hopefully soon from within, would fall apart. However, if Hitler had chosen to look more deeply, especially as June faded into late July and August, he might have recognized that this fight was going to be more difficult than he imagined.

First, whatever goodwill existed in Ukraine, as well as the Baltic states, where the hatred of Russia ran deep, soon disappeared when the Nazis showed themselves to be, well, Nazis. By the fall of 1941, the kernels of organized resistance had begun to grow, and by 1942, it would grow to be well-organized and increasingly well-equipped, not to mention numerous.

Second, the Germans, though they had inflicted immense casualties on the Soviets, were also suffering huge losses, and unlike the Soviets, they could ill afford them. And not only did their losses mount, but supplies also began to run short. The Germans did not plan for a protracted war, and their resources of oil, metals, and the other things needed for a protracted conflict began to run out. This would only get worse with time. And, of course, the distances involved also made it difficult for the Germans to get supplies to their front-line troops, especially with the arrival of bad weather and the increasing numbers of partisans as the war continued.

Third, Soviet resistance began to stiffen as the months dragged on. Diaries kept by German soldiers in the field speak of the fanatic resistance of some Soviet troops, which increased the farther the Germans drove into the country, as the Soviets began to realize more and more that this war was one not just of conquest but also of annihilation.

As summer turned into fall, and then fall into winter, the Red Army began to show itself more capable. Part of this was due to the weather, but as time went by (and especially by the second half of the war), Stalin smartly realized that he was not the military genius he had thought himself to be on June 21st, 1941. Where Hitler increasingly took control away from his generals, Stalin gave them more leeway. This meant that Soviet troops in many, but not all, circumstances could retreat to fight another day and that his field commanders had a greater say in where and when to attack and retreat, as well as in the allocation of troops and supplies. As we will see, better-trained Soviet Far Eastern troops arrived near Moscow in late November/early December 1941, once Stalin realized the Japanese were attacking across the Pacific. Additionally, the Soviets began a more modern training regimen, especially among their generals and mid-level commanders, giving them instruction on combined arms attacks. By the second half of 1943, the Soviets were masters of the blitzkrieg themselves.

Lastly, though it took some time before it could have an effect, both Great Britain and the United States began sending massive amounts of military support and other aid to the Soviet Union. Though most Soviet tanks and

planes were made at home, the Western Allies shipped tens of thousands of trucks, rifles, machine guns, food supplies, ball bearings, and factory parts to the USSR, even while they were fighting the Germans themselves. Both British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt knew that should the Soviet Union be defeated or come to terms with Hitler, the war in Western Europe would be over, or, at the very least, the victory would be greatly delayed and come at a much higher cost.

Chapter 3 – All Seems Lost

In the months before Operation Barbarossa, Hitler and many of the leading figures on his general staff debated what the main goal of the operation would be. Many people have a vision of Hitler as a raving madman, ranting and threatening his generals until he got his way. This certainly was the case many times in the latter part of the war. However, in the first part of the conflict, he was more likely to listen and debate with his officers, and this is what happened in the lead-up to the invasion of Russia.

World War II spawned an entire industry—alternative history. Pages upon pages have been written on “how and if Hitler could have won WWII,” and many of them focus on his actions, or lack of them, in the Soviet Union, and to be sure, what follows here will be debated by those who read it.

Very generally speaking, Hitler’s plan was to knock the Soviets out of the war by capturing what he believed to be the most important part of the country—the south. There, Ukraine supplied the majority of grain and other foodstuffs to the people of the USSR. It also contained vast supplies of coal. Farther east in the south were the oil fields of the Caucasus, which were some of the richest in the world, especially those in Baku, and if there was one key resource the German war machine lacked, it was oil.

Hitler also believed an attack to the north would liberate the Baltic nations from communism, and this liberation, carried to its fullest extent, would reach the port of Murmansk, where the Soviet Union had its western port. Taking Murmansk would help in cutting off any possible supplies brought in from Britain or elsewhere. The capture of Leningrad would also dishearten the Soviets as it was the “home” of their revolution. Perhaps most importantly, Hitler and some of his supporters in the military believed that the most important factor would be the destruction of the Red Army in the field, preferably in the vast plains between Poland and Moscow.

However, many of Hitler’s leading generals, especially General Erich Marcks, believed that the best strategy would be to utilize the majority of the German strength and make a drive toward Moscow, “cutting off the head of the snake,” as one of them put it. With their capital taken and their armies demoralized in the field, the Soviets would either sue for peace or fall apart.

The Balkans

Before Hitler and his generals could prove or disprove each other's theories, they were faced with a situation that completely threw off their timetable. Hitler's plan was to invade the USSR in mid-May. This would give the German forces perhaps six months of good weather before the Russian winter set in. They were confident (one could easily say over-confident) that they could achieve their goals in that time, and despite the delay described to you below, they continued to believe Operation Barbarossa would be over before the worst of the weather hit.

In October 1940, Benito Mussolini, the fascist dictator of Italy and Hitler's ally, invaded Greece without telling Hitler of his plans. Mussolini was sure his armies would be in Athens in a short period of time, and then he would be able to brag of yet another addition to his "New Roman Empire" of Albania, Libya, Ethiopia, and a small sliver of southern France that had been given to him as a gift by Hitler after the defeat of that country. Mussolini's plans went completely awry, with the Greeks not only mounting a stout defense but also counterattacking and driving the Italians back into Albania where their attack began.

Soon, it became clear to Hitler that he would have to bail out his Italian friend lest the British use Greece as a base of operations against his own southern flank, and so, Germany was rushing troops to Greece as fast as possible.

But in order for German troops to get to Greece, they needed passage through Yugoslavia. The regent of Yugoslavia, Prince Paul, who was holding the throne for the future king, Peter II, to come of age, was pro-German and was prepared to let the German troops pass through the country. Anti-German forces, alarmed at this loss of national sovereignty and the possibility that German troops might not leave, staged a coup and placed Peter II, who was pro-Ally in his outlook, on the throne. Peter II and his generals refused Hitler's troops passage just days before their planned movement south.

So, on April 6th, 1940, Hitler and Mussolini invaded Yugoslavia from the south and north, and though they fought hard, the Yugoslavs were overwhelmed in two weeks. The German troops moved south at the same time and conquered Greece by April 30th. A month-long campaign to take the large island of Crete then ensued, but by the start of June, all of Greece was under Axis control.

Though the operations in the Balkans was relatively quick, it pushed back Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union by about six weeks. Many historians have argued that these six weeks were crucial in allowing the Soviets to regroup in the fall and for the Russian winter to set in, as the Germans only approached Moscow in late October/early November 1941. However, some believe that in the long run, even if the Germans had captured Moscow, the Soviets would have fought on, having already moved most of their industrial plants to the Ural Mountains in one of the most amazing feats of reorganization in modern history. At Stalin's order, virtually every vital factory part and machine, not to mention supplies and manpower, were removed before the Germans arrived and moved hundreds of miles to the east, out of range of the German bombers. That which could not be moved was simply destroyed.

Back to Russia

The first part of the Great Patriotic War was a series of great encirclement battles fought on the western Russian and Ukrainian plains. These types of actions were fought throughout the early German campaign, and a number of these larger battles took place, in which hundreds of thousands of men were involved (and sometimes, in the case of the Red Army, were taken as prisoners).

The first major battle of Operation Barbarossa took place in the region near the Polish city of Bialystok and the Soviet city of Minsk, which were about 215 miles apart. The battle started on the opening day of the invasion, June 22nd, and lasted until July 9th. The German *Wehrmacht* used the blitzkrieg and envelopment tactics described earlier to surround, kill, and capture a large number of Soviet troops, who were trapped in the area by the fast-moving German columns that had them surrounded before they were even aware of it. As a result, nearly half a million Soviet troops were killed, captured, or wounded, 5,000 vehicles destroyed, and almost 2,000 aircraft destroyed, mostly on the ground. This first major battle of the Nazi invasion had many in Germany believing that their thoughts of a quick and relatively easy victory would come true. Compared to the Soviet losses, the Germans lost perhaps 15,000, which included killed, wounded, and missing men.

To the south, another encirclement battle took place, beginning on July 15th and ending on August 8th, near the city of Uman, Ukraine, which led to the most important Ukrainian city, Kyiv (Ukraine's capital today). There, three German Army groups, totaling an estimated 400,000 men and 600 tanks,

outmaneuvered three Soviet army groups that totaled 300,000 men, killing or capturing two-thirds of the Soviet force.

The Germans continued to drive eastward, and between July 8th and the end of the month, they engaged the Red Army in a massive battle near the city of Minsk (today the capital of Belarus). Nearly a million men on both sides took part in the battle, each with about the same number of tanks and guns, but yet again, the Soviets were outmaneuvered and surrounded. The Soviet losses were staggering: over 300,000 killed or captured, with 5,000 tanks and 2,000 aircraft destroyed.

As the summer wore on, the Germans were both elated and amazed. They could not believe their good fortune of winning battle after battle and destroying or capturing so many Soviet troops. But how many Soviet troops were there? As the summer turned to fall, the German estimates of Soviet strength proved wrong time and time again. Just when the Germans thought the Russians were finished, new units would turn up at the front.

What's more, even though some of these units had barely any training, and many were put into the front lines with few bullets for their guns or even no guns at all (they were told to get one from the dead on the field), Soviet resistance seemed to stiffen the farther eastward the Nazis drove. At times, it was fanatical, with waves of Soviet soldiers simply charging en masse into German formations. Of course, many times these soldiers had no choice; they would have been killed by the political commissars and troops had they retreated, but it seemed to the Germans that the fighting was getting tougher the farther into Russia they got. Without a doubt, many Soviet troops took the other route and simply gave up—, hundreds of thousands of them, in fact. This leads us to another gruesome fact of World War II. Of the millions of Soviet soldiers taken prisoner by the Germans throughout World War II, especially at the beginning, many were simply put in pens and left to die of exposure, thirst, hunger, and disease, which is rife when people are forced together in unsanitary conditions. Hundreds of thousands were simply shot. Millions were sent to German-controlled territory. Some of them were sent to Germany and other places to work in forced labor camps. Many others were sent to the concentration camps that were sprouting up all over Poland. The first people gassed at Auschwitz were actually Soviet POWs. Making this situation even more tragic is the fact that those who survived the Nazis were often sent to the Soviet Gulag after the war, as Stalin viewed them as potential Western spies and/or

traitors for having been captured. Many perished in the Soviet camps after surviving the terrors of the Nazis.



Illustration 5: Masses of Soviet POWs taken in one of the encirclement battles

during the first weeks of Barbarossa. Most Soviet POWs would not survive. As they approached the Soviet capital of Moscow and the Ukrainian city of Kyiv, the Germans fought the Red Army in two more giant encirclement battles: one at Smolensk, located on the approaches to Moscow, during most of July and the other at Kyiv itself from August 23rd to September 26th. At Smolensk, 430,000 Germans took on over half a million Soviets. The battle took place over an area hundreds of square miles, with thrust and counter-thrust actions occurring throughout the month of July. It even included savage house-to-house fighting in cities throughout the area, especially in Smolensk itself. Throughout the area, atrocities took place on both sides, though the Germans targeted not only the soldiers of the Red Army but also civilians and, of course, the large Jewish population that lived in the area.

Smolensk resulted in another Soviet defeat, with almost 200,000 dead, another quarter of a million wounded, and over 300,000 captured.

Furthermore, anywhere between 1,500 and 3,000 armored vehicles of all types and almost 1,000 aircraft were destroyed. The Germans lost much less than that—some 30,000 killed and 100,000 wounded—but unlike the Soviets, they could not afford such losses week after week. And the number of German dead was to increase as time went on.

At the beginning of the conflict, Hitler had ordered his generals to focus on the south, where most of the USSR's resources were located. As the summer wore on, his generals convinced him to change the focus of the German attack back toward the center, but after the Battle of Smolensk, Hitler again ordered a shift, convinced that the Russians were on their last legs and would put more emphasis on saving their resources, especially their coal and oil.

In late August through late September, the biggest of the encirclement battles of Operation Barbarossa was fought near Kyiv. There, half a million German, Hungarian, Romanian, and Italian troops fought an increasingly difficult battle against the Red Army. The Soviets initially had about 600,000 men in the area but fed more troops into the battle as September ground on. The battle didn't take place at the city but rather throughout the northwestern part of Ukraine, encompassing thousands of square miles.



One of the demoralizing effects on the German soldiers was the landscape. Coming from a densely populated country that had many different geographical characteristics, the endless plains of the Soviet Union began to get to them. To many, it was like being at sea or, more accurately, in “a sea of grass,” with nothing but rolling hills and the occasional tree or hut to break up the scenery. What’s more, the Soviets kept fighting, drawing them farther and farther into this alien landscape.

During the First Battle of Kyiv (Kiev), the Soviets lost hundreds of thousands of men, who were either killed or captured. But the German casualties began to mount, as they had over 125,000 killed, wounded, or missing. Throughout the battles in Ukraine, the Nazi *Einsatzgruppen*, as well as the German Army, committed atrocity after atrocity, the most infamous of which was the slaughter of Jews at Babi Yar on the outskirts of Kyiv. Over 30,000 people were killed (today, the site is a memorial within the city limits). Throughout Ukraine, literally thousands of execution sites have been found since the war’s end. If you are interested in learning more

about this subject, please take a look at the bibliography for an excellent title on this subject.

In the north, where the country was more wooded and rougher for tanks to traverse, the Germans advanced to the gates of Leningrad. Their Finnish allies agreed to help the Germans by pinning down the Soviet forces on the Karelian Isthmus, much of which had been Finnish until 1940, but they would not assist in the siege of Leningrad. However, they did battle with the Soviets to the north in Karelia, where many ethnic Finns still lived. The 900-day siege of Leningrad will be discussed in an upcoming volume of *Captivating History*.

Once the First Battle of Kyiv (Kiev) was over, Hitler once again shifted the bulk of his forces north to take Moscow, but between the initial shift southward and back again, much time was lost. From the beginning of October until January 1942, the battle raged on in front of the Soviet capital. The German scout troops at one point woke up and were able to see the spires of the Kremlin, but that is as far as the Germans got.

Advised by his spy Richard Sorge in September that Japan would attack westward (and this time believing him, at least partially), Stalin began to move his massive Far Eastern armies westward to defend the capital. On December 7th, 1941, Japan attacked the US at Pearl Harbor, confirming Sorge's reports, and the Soviets then increased the number of troops sent west, all the while having been raising and training millions of more men.

Beginning in October, the weather turned decisively against the Germans. In the fall and spring, western Russia and Ukraine are subject to rains that turn the countryside (and the many dirt roads of the time) into quagmires. Troop and tank movements slowed or ground to a halt completely. When fall began to turn into winter, the roads began to freeze, allowing the German tanks to be able to advance again.

However, it had become abundantly clear that the Germans were ill-prepared for a winter war. As Winston Churchill said in a speech during the war, "there is snow, there is frost and all that. Hitler forgot about the Russian winter. He must have been very loosely educated." German troops faced sub-zero temperatures while wearing summer clothing. Germans at home began to get the idea that something was wrong when they were asked to donate winter clothing, even women's furs, to the soldiers in Russia.

Meanwhile, German supplies dwindled. Gas was running short, and the weather and increasing partisan attacks made the situation worse. Tanks and other machines had to be kept idling all the time, or else they would freeze. Frostbite took thousands off the front lines, sometimes even into shallow graves.

And then, on December 5th, 1941, the Soviets counterattacked. Masses of Soviet soldiers came pouring out of the mist atop T-34 tanks that were not even painted because they were needed *immediately* at the front. They succeeded in pushing the Germans back hundreds of miles from the Soviet capital until the Germans were able to mount a counter-offensive and stabilize the front line. But the danger to the Soviet capital was over, and Moscow would not be threatened again.

Conclusion

Operation Barbarossa was only the first phase of Hitler's plan to conquer the Soviet Union. From a strictly military standpoint, the operation was a success. Millions of Soviet troops had been killed and captured, and tens of thousands of square miles of Soviet territory had been seized.

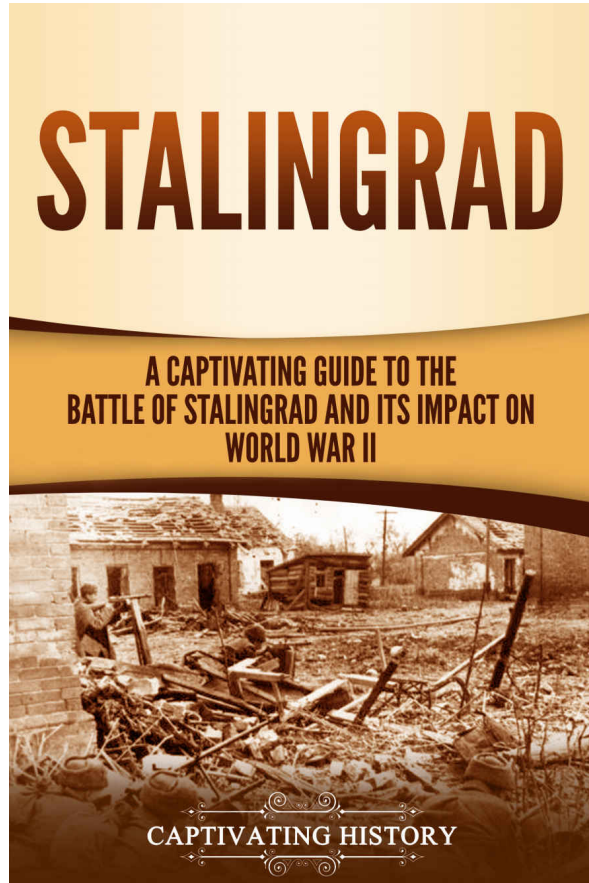
But, as Hitler was to admit to Finnish Field Marshal Mannerheim in 1942, he and his generals had seriously underestimated the Soviet capacity to wage war. They had misunderstood the industrial plants built by Stalin before the war and did not expect the Soviets to be able to evacuate much of that industry to the Ural Mountains, which was out of the range of his bombers. He also underestimated the willingness of the Soviet people to work for victory.

Given the ease with which Hitler won the first battles of the campaign, it's easy to see how his ideas about Soviet military skills were reinforced, but as the Soviets were being defeated in the first months of the war, they were also learning, and incompetent officers were being replaced by the leaders that would take the Red Army into Berlin in 1945.

And finally, though the Soviets lost far more men to the Germans than the other way around, most of the surviving German soldiers would have told you that the last thing they would have questioned during the war was the courage of the soldiers in the Red Army.

Part 5: Stalingrad

A Captivating Guide to the Battle of Stalingrad and Its Impact on World War II



Introduction

The Battle of Stalingrad is rightfully known as the “turning point” of the Second World War. Before the battle, which took place from August 1942 until the beginning of February 1943, the Germans were victorious everywhere, despite some localized setbacks (for example, at Moscow in 1941). After Stalingrad, the Germans were constantly pushed back, with some notable examples being Kursk in the summer of 1943 and the Bulge in 1944.

During WWII, the Soviet Union suffered somewhere in the neighborhood of twenty million dead. For those of you reading in the United States and the United Kingdom, the death toll for those nations in the war was around 415,000 and 483,000, respectively. In the approximate six months of the Battle of Stalingrad, the Germans, their Hungarian, Romanian, and Italian allies, and the Soviets lost an estimated one million men.

As the battle wore on, the German soldiers gave the battle in Stalingrad a nickname: “Der Rattenkrieg,” or “the war of the rats.” The fighting in Stalingrad took place in the ruins of a large city, as well as below in the sewers. Much of the fighting was close-quarter combat, and in many cases, it was hand-to-hand. Men died by the hundreds of thousands, just like dirty, savage rats.

Adolf Hitler originally wanted his 6th Army to protect the northern flank of his armies as they drove into the oil fields and fertile farmlands of the Caucasus, but as time went by, the battle took on a life of its own. In Hitler’s mind, the city that bore Stalin’s name became a symbol of Soviet resistance and of the Soviet leader himself. If the Germans took the city, perhaps the Soviet Union (USSR) would finally fall, taking Stalin down with it.

Timeline

July 31st, 1942: Hitler orders his troops to move on Stalingrad.

August 23rd–25th: Initial heavy bombing of the city.

August 24th: North of the city, German troops reach the Volga River. In surveying the city, the commander of the German 14th Panzer Division says that the Germans should not attack the city and set up defensive lines farther westward, as the city is too defensible. He is ignored.

August 25th: Fighting begins in the city itself.

September 13th–25th: The city is divided. The Germans are in the north and south, and the Soviets are in the middle. They will gradually be pushed back to an area about 200 meters (around 655 feet) from the Volga, except for a few pockets of resistance, such as Pavlov's House and the factories.

Between September to November: There are 700 organized large-scale German attacks on and in the city.

Late September: General Franz Halder, chief of staff of the German High Command, expresses doubt to Hitler about the ability of the Germans to win at Stalingrad. He voices concerns about Soviet strength, long supply lines, dwindling German manpower reserves, and the weakness of the German allies on the wings of the Stalingrad front. Hitler removes him from command, and he is forcibly retired.

October 7th: Germans occupy much, but not all, of the Tractor Factory complex. The Soviet 62nd Army under Vasily Chuikov is down to approximately 700 men and are pushed back within meters of the Volga. Ninety percent of the city is in German hands. Despite this, Soviet intelligence reports indicate German morale is low and their physical condition poor, while Soviet morale seems to be growing, sparked by the determined defense of the city.

November 11th: The last major German push fails to take the city.

November 13th: Stalin approves Operation Uranus.

On November 3rd, German soldier Wilhelm Hoffman wrote in his diary, "In the last few days, our battalion has several times tried to attack the Russian positions—to no avail. On this sector, the Russians won't let you lift your head. There have been a number of cases of self-inflicted wounds and malingering among the men."

On November 10th, while the Russians were planning a big surprise attack, Hoffman wrote, “A letter from Elsa today. Everyone expects us home for Christmas. In Germany everyone believes we already hold Stalingrad. How wrong they are. If they could only see what Stalingrad has done to our army.”



Illustration 1: German veteran well into the campaign

Chapter 1 – Before the Battle

Hitler's armies invaded the USSR on June 22nd, 1941, setting off Operation Barbarossa. Three million men, more than three thousand tanks, and thousands of combat aircraft surged across the Soviet border within days, and the Germans pushed the Soviet Red Army back a hundred miles or more. The attack came as a total shock to Josef Stalin, the Soviet leader, despite the many warnings he had received from his military officials, diplomats, and spies.

Germany and the Soviet Union had signed a non-aggression pact, known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, in August 1939. This pact divided Poland between them, gave Stalin the green light to annex the Baltic states without German interference, and allowed Stalin to make demands on Finland without having to worry about Hitler. Both sides benefited from the pact in other ways as well. Germany would buy huge amounts of Soviet raw materials and food; in return, the Germans would not have to worry about a Soviet conflict when it turned to attack Western Europe. The Soviets, on the other hand, would get hard currency, German machinery, factory parts, and other highly refined goods.

Stalin believed that Hitler would eventually attack the Soviet Union, but he believed that it would be stalled by the pact and perhaps prevented entirely by further negotiations. The terms of the pact were, in theory, to last ten years, which, in Stalin's mind, would give him the time he needed to finalize the massive efforts to modernize the USSR, which he had begun in the early 1930s.

Additionally, Stalin believed what Hitler had written in his book, *Mein Kampf*. Hitler thought the reason why Germany was defeated in World War One was the fact that it had undertaken a two-front war, one against France and Britain in the West and one against Russia in the East. Other parts of Hitler's book emphasized the need for Germany to expand into what Hitler considered "the empty spaces of Russia." Stalin would have done well to place his emphasis on that and Hitler's irrationality when it came to Russia and communism than on the idea that Hitler would not engage in two fronts at once.

By the end of June 1940, Hitler had successfully invaded Poland, Norway, Denmark, Belgium, Holland, and France. Great Britain seemed to be all but defeated; its armies in mainland Europe had been driven back across the

English Channel. Hermann Göring, Hitler's second-in-command and chief of the *Luftwaffe* (the German air force), assured Hitler that the British would soon ask for terms of surrender or be defeated outright in the invasion that the German armed forces had been planning.

In the winter of 1939/40, Stalin ordered the Red Army to attack Finland after the Finnish government refused Stalin's demands to hand over a sizable portion of its lands bordering the USSR. Though Stalin's forces eventually prevailed, with Finland forced to give the land to the Soviet Union, the performance of the Red Army in the conflict was largely poor. Hitler, along with most of the world, saw this inferior performance and determined that the Red Army was no match for his victorious armed forces (known in German as the *Wehrmacht*).

The German High Command had been ordered to plan for an invasion of the USSR shortly after the defeat of France in June 1940. Over the following months, the Germans perfected their plan, which Hitler wanted to take place in May 1941. However, some of his generals were pessimistic about the proposed operation; they believed the USSR was too large and too strong to be defeated, especially while Great Britain was still in the fight. They reminded Hitler of the dangers of fighting a two-front war, something that he himself had blamed for Germany's defeat in WWI.

Other members of the German General Staff had been cautious and reserved about the idea of invading the Soviet Union, but they became more enthusiastic after the rapid defeat of France and the seemingly poor performance of the Red Army in the Winter War against Finland. A small number were keen on the idea of an invasion from the start, believing, like Hitler, that the USSR would fold as easily as France and the rest of Europe.

This is often seen as one of the top ten greatest military blunders in all of history. But in the first few weeks of Operation Barbarossa (which began in late June 1941), it seemed that Hitler might be right. Huge numbers of Soviet prisoners were taken from the battles on the plains and rolling hills of western Russia. Aside from the hundreds of thousands of Soviet prisoners taken, hundreds of thousands more were killed. The *Wehrmacht* drove hundreds of miles into eastern Poland, which had been under Stalin's control since the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939, and the Soviet Union.

Though the German blitzkrieg ("lightning war") tactics completely flummoxed the defending Soviets, the Red Army did not help their own

cause, as they played right into German hands. The blitzkrieg depended on highly coordinated attacks between air, ground (both armored and infantry), and artillery forces, trying as best as they could to bring overwhelming force to bear on weak points of the Soviet lines. Once they had punched a hole in the lines, the armored and mechanized infantry would pour through, moving swiftly to the enemy's rear to surround them, with the bulk of the regular infantry attacking the front lines at the same time to hold the enemy in place.

Instead of coordinating their attacks properly, the Soviets attacked and counterattacked everywhere, regardless of whether it was strategically or tactically sound. The reason for this had to do with the nature of the Stalinist regime and Stalin's reaction to Hitler's invasion. In the late 1930s, Josef Stalin had carried out a purge of the Red Army, seeing enemies everywhere. He had done the same shortly before with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and much of Soviet society. His paranoia and desire for total control resulted in perhaps the most totalitarian system in history.

Once Stalin had established his unquestioned control of the country, he was free to attack the Red Army, the one institution that might pose a threat to him. No real evidence exists that anyone in the Red Army was plotting against him, but to Stalin, a disapproving glance or an unwanted association was enough to get you in trouble.

In 1937, Stalin's secret police began a purge of the officer ranks of the army, decimating the higher ranks and arresting thousands of lower-ranking officers. Thousands of men were killed outright. Many more were sent to Siberia, where most of them perished in the labor camp system known as the Gulag. Those on the secret police's lists who weren't arrested were forced into retirement. Stalin was then left with an army that would not dare to defy or question any of Stalin's edicts, orders, or "suggestions." This was one reason for the poor showing of the Red Army against Finland in 1939/40.

The Finnish debacle had shown to Stalin that the Soviets' use of mass infantry attacks was a poor method to use in modern warfare, and reforms were slowly being instituted. However, by June 22nd, 1941, the opening date of Operation Barbarossa, these had not filtered down to most of the army.

Aside from the institutional problems, Stalin's reaction to Hitler's attack was a combination of disbelief, panic, and depression. Initially, the "Great Leader" refused to believe that Hitler's forces were actually attacking. Then, when confronted with the proof, Stalin ordered virtually every unit facing the Germans to attack, regardless of their situation. This meant that unorganized, retreating, or surrounded units haphazardly attacked with virtually no preparation. To them, it was better to take a chance on the battlefield than the sure bullet in the back, as Stalin's secret police were seemingly everywhere (including with commanders at the front).

After giving vague orders to "attack," Stalin retreated to his vacation retreat, or *dacha*, in the forest, which was miles from Moscow. When a group of officials, including his trusted Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov, appeared at his home, Stalin appeared "strange and downcast," not like his regular self. Stalin thought they had come to arrest him, for when Molotov told Stalin that they thought a central committee tasked with the war effort should be formed immediately, Stalin asked, "Who is to head this committee?" When Molotov replied, "You," Stalin knew he was safe and began to break through his depression. Still, despite Stalin's "reawakening," the Soviets continued to be pushed back.

However, by the early fall, the Red Army's defense had begun to stiffen. Though defeated in huge battles around Smolensk and Vyazma, among other places, the Germans found that the farther they drove toward the Soviet capital of Moscow and the Soviet "second city" of Leningrad, the stiffer Soviet resistance became.

The Nazis also had some rude shocks in the first weeks of the invasion. Though the Red Army was losing men in droves (with men either killed in action or taken prisoner), there always seemed to be more of them. Additionally, the Germans found out that their tanks were inferior to the newest Soviet tanks, the famed T-34 and KV-1. However, these tanks were just entering production when the war began, so their numbers were low. The Soviets also did not know how to use them properly, throwing them into action haphazardly and in badly coordinated attacks.

Lastly, the geography of the USSR began to slowly take a toll on the Germans. The country consists of hundreds upon hundreds of miles of plains, with nary a tree as a landmark. It was a land that was completely foreign to the invading forces. And although it is commonly thought that the German Army was a highly mechanized force, this was not the case.

Most infantrymen marched, and most of their supplies came on horse-drawn wagons. This was detrimental to the German war effort in the USSR, as the country had poor roads and primitive (and differently sized) railway systems.

While the Russian winter is well known for its harshness, the summers on the plains can be brutal as well. There is no shade, barely any water (especially since the retreating Soviets had poisoned many wells), dust, and endless marches before the terror of combat. After a time, German morale began to suffer. This happened slowly at first, as they had some tremendous victories to help encourage them, but as the weeks passed, discontent grew. Their one final victory always seemed to be just out of reach, despite predictions of the war ending soon from the Nazi Party and the Führer.

At the beginning of September 1941, the Germans were at the gates of Leningrad, but they were not able to enter the city. The Red Army, as well as Leningrad's civilians, had prepared a belt of defenses that were just too strong for the Germans to easily break. Instead, the Nazis ringed the city and began an almost 900-day siege, which claimed over one million lives, most of them civilians.

In the south of the country, the Germans, along with their Hungarian, Italian, and Romanian allies, drove deep into Ukraine, besieging Odessa (spelled as Odesa today) and pushing out to the shores of the Black Sea and the Crimean Peninsula.

In the middle of the German drive, their Army Group Center, led by Field Marshal Fedor von Bock, found itself at the gates of Moscow at the beginning of December. Some units reported seeing the domes of St. Basil's Cathedral in the Kremlin glinting in the sun far in the distance. That is as close as they would ever get.

Even with the seemingly endless supply of men the Germans were facing, the Soviets had more men fighting in the Soviet Far East. They were there to guard against a possible Japanese attack, as the Soviets suspected the Japanese would seize the resources of Siberia, but Soviet spies and diplomats informed Stalin that the Japanese had other plans. Stalin, in desperate need and now more believing of his intelligence services, ordered the transfer of hundreds of thousands of men to attack the Germans at Moscow, which they did on December 5th, 1941, driving the Germans back over one hundred miles before being halted.

By late January 1942, the front lines in Russia had stabilized, and Hitler began to plan for a spring/summer offensive as soon as the weather permitted.

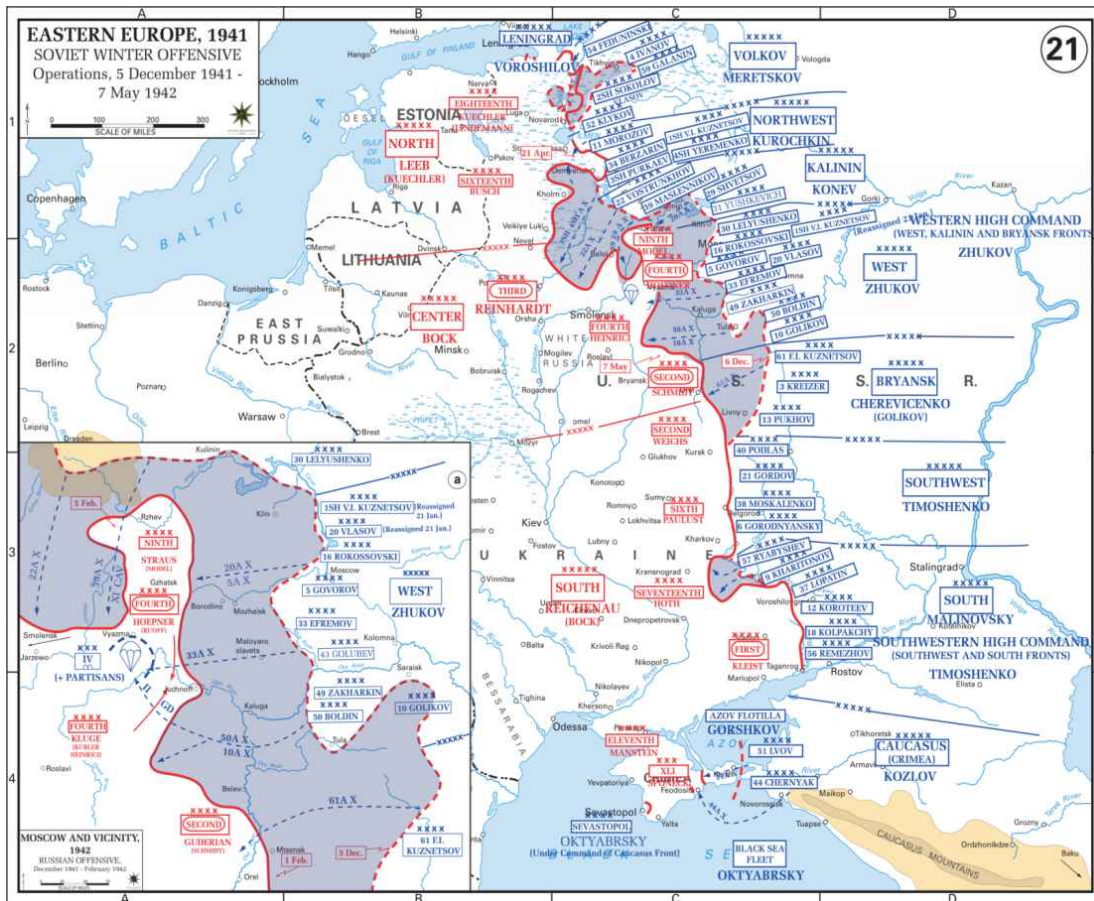


Illustration 2: General front lines after Soviet Moscow offensive until the spring of 1942

Chapter 2 – *Fall Blau* (“Case Blue”)

Fall Blau was the operational name for Hitler’s planned attack into southern Russia, which included the Caucasus Peninsula, home to some of the world’s most productive oil fields at the time.

The Germans needed oil more than almost any other natural resource. Without it, there was no realistic way for them to win the war. Germany itself produced next to none, and the Romanian fields in and around Ploesti were not enough to keep the German war machine rolling. Tanks, planes, U-boats, and other support vehicles were dependent on oil. The Germans had stockpiled large quantities before the war, but that had essentially vanished. They were using more than they could produce or import, especially considering the lock the British Royal Navy had on the oceanic trade routes.

Hitler was confronted with a serious dilemma at the start of spring in 1942. He was no longer strong enough to attack on all fronts as he had been in 1941, and the Soviets (to his surprise) were not defeated. So, to knock the Soviets out of the war, which would allow Hitler to concentrate on the final defeat of the United Kingdom and the United States (with whom he declared war on December 11th, 1941), he and the German General Staff had to come up with a plan.

A considerable number of German generals encouraged Hitler not to go on the offensive at all. They argued that it was best for Germany to build up its defenses where they stood or perhaps even pull back to a more defensible position. They also argued that not only were the German oil reserves being depleted at a rapid rate, but the number of combat-age men was going to start declining very soon. Additionally, the *Luftwaffe*, which was still controlling the skies above the battlefield, was barely making up for its losses and losing skilled pilots almost daily.

Some also argued that the German push in North Africa, which had the stated goal of seizing the Suez Canal (thereby adding thousands of U-boat-infested miles to British ships coming from the Middle East and India with supplies) and potentially gaining control of the oil fields of Arabia, might be reinforced with men from Russia should the Führer decide to establish defensible lines on the Eastern Front.

As you likely know, Hitler would have none of this. He was convinced that the Germans were just one strong push away before the Soviets either collapsed or begged for peace. Once this was done, Hitler would establish his eastern empire along the Ural Mountains and Volga River. Beyond that expanse of territory, at least in his mind, was nothing but empty space, where the surviving Russians would go to freeze and starve to death.

The force responsible for carrying out Case Blue was Army Group South. This army group was originally commanded by Field Marshal Fedor von Bock, but he was replaced with Field Marshal Maximilian von Weichs in July, as Hitler believed Bock had not carried out his plans rapidly enough. To fulfill Hitler's plan, Army Group South was split into two groups: Army Group A and Army Group B.

Army Group A, commanded by Field Marshal Wilhelm List, was tasked with taking the Caucasus and its oil fields, most of which were in the city of Baku, far to the southeast. It consisted of the German 1st Panzer Army, the 11th Army, the 17th Army, and the 3rd Romanian Army.

Army Group B was originally given the task of protecting Army Group A's flank and cutting off the trade and access to resources on the Volga River at Stalingrad. This army group was composed of the German 4th Panzer Army, the 2nd Army, and the 6th Army, which was Hitler's largest army. The Italian 8th, the Romanian 4th, and the Hungarian 2nd Armies were also attached. Army Group B was commanded by Weichs after Army Group South was divided.

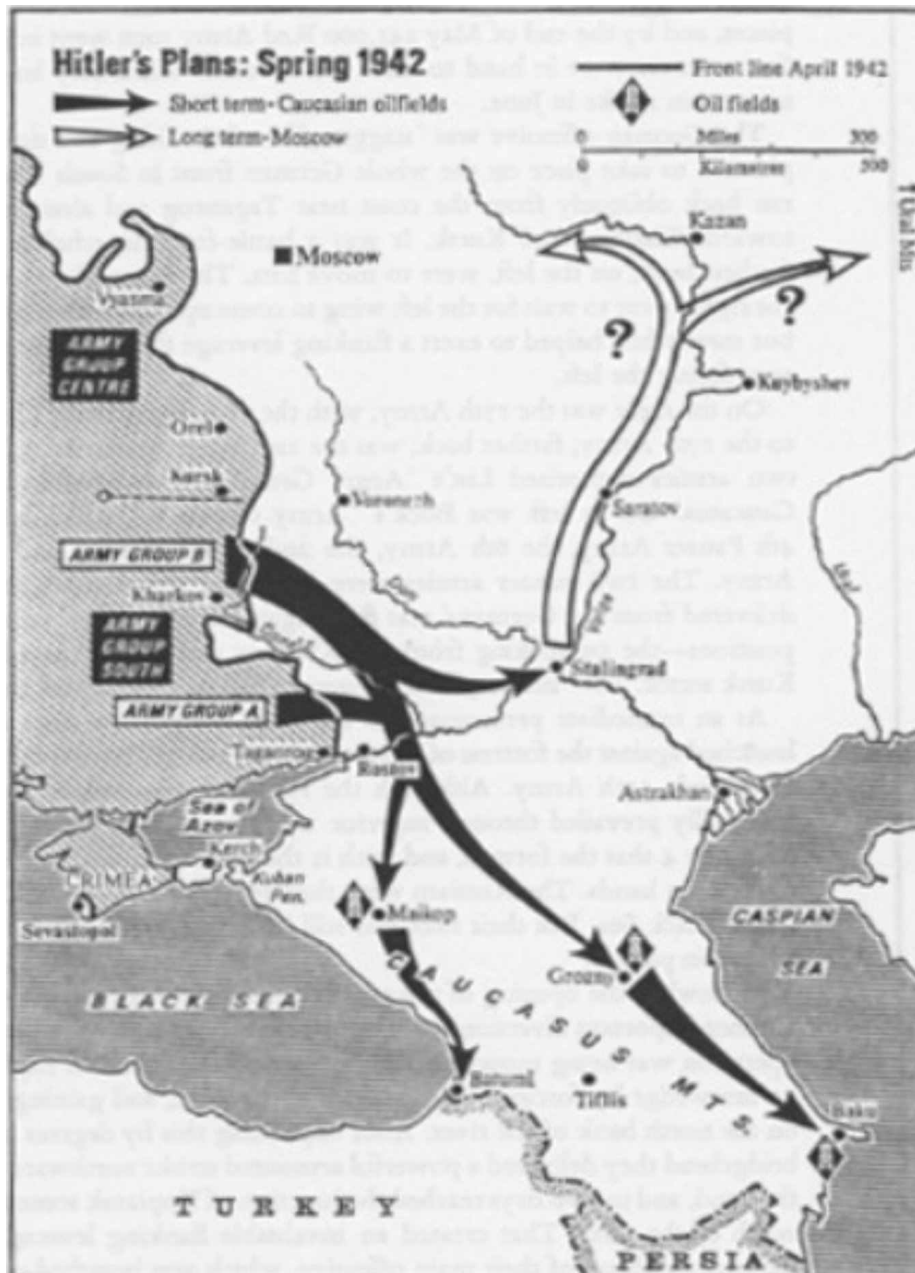


Illustration 3: The basic plan for Case Blue, spring 1942

Over the course of time, the main goal of the German thrust changed from the oil fields to Stalingrad. By the time the battle actually began in the city, Stalingrad seemed to be like a giant malevolent black hole, drawing men to their deaths.

Although the Caucasus was supposed to be the main objective, the stronger and more numerous 6th Army approached Stalingrad right from the get-go. The 6th Army had never seen defeat. The men of the 6th Army had paved the way in the West, playing a central role in the defeat of Belgium and France

and driving the British Expeditionary Force from the mainland. In the initial stages of Operation Barbarossa, they had driven the Red Army back and inflicted decisive defeats at the Battle of Uman (mid-July to early August 1941) and taken Kiev (late August to late September), one of the Soviet Union's most important and historic cities. The 6th Army had done the same to the important Ukrainian city of Kharkov during a swift and fierce battle in late October. The German force repulsed a strong Soviet counterattack there in May 1942, just before it began its drive toward the Volga.

So, as the 6th Army moved on Stalingrad, morale was high, despite its relatively unknown and taciturn commander, General Friedrich Paulus. Paulus became the commander of the 6th Army in January 1942, taking it over from the more experienced and highly popular commander Field Marshal Walther von Reichenau. Reichenau had moved up to command Army Group South in November, and for two months, the 6th Army did not have a commander. When Paulus was named its chief, many in the 6th Army, and the German Army in general, were surprised, for Paulus had never commanded a unit larger than a battalion in combat. Two months after Paulus took command of the 6th Army, Reichenau died of natural causes, which greatly affected the men and left Paulus without someone familiar with the position to consult with.

As a side note, many WWII histories, especially from before the 1990s, write Paulus's name as "von Paulus." "Von" signifies nobility, which Paulus was not. It was also sometimes given to men by Germany's leaders as a sign of respect and recognition. Hitler never bestowed this honor on Paulus. Historians sometimes assume that because he was made a field marshal, he was given the "von" title as well, but he was not.

Paulus was a highly regarded planner and showed sound strategic instinct. Like virtually all of the German general officers, Paulus had spent considerable time on the German General Staff, which was responsible for most of the planning for the German Army's campaigns (of course, Hitler played an increasingly large part as the war went on). Paulus had been deputy chief of the General Staff after leading troops in campaigns in Poland and the West. In that position, he played a large part in the planning of Operation Barbarossa. Paulus was no stranger to war in the East, but in an army that was increasingly becoming known worldwide for its dashing and unorthodox thinkers (such as Rommel and Guderian, to name just two), Paulus was regarded as relatively unimaginative and uninspiring. He also

did not cut a very dashing figure. He was small and slightly haggard-looking; he looked more like a head waiter than a general leading one of the world's most powerful fighting forces into combat.

Still, Paulus was a sound planner, and he was considered to be an expert logistician, as he understood the supply chain and how to get men, equipment, and supplies where they needed to be when they needed to be there.

So, all things considered, the men of the 6th were in high spirits when Case Blue began. Aside from their record in combat, the 6th had great numbers of the German Army's most modern equipment, as well as the support of the powerful air forces.

At the beginning of Case Blue, the Axis forces (including the 6th Army, the 4th Panzer Army, and other German forces and assorted allied forces) had 1.5 million men, almost 2,000 tanks and assault guns, and an estimated 1,600 to 2,100 aircraft. To put this in perspective (at least in terms of numbers), in 2020, the entire US Army is expected to include just over a million personnel and just over 2,000 fighter aircraft.^[1] As one can see, the German forces driving deep into the southern Soviet Union were formidable.

However, they did have a number of weaknesses, the prime of which was supply. Not only were the German supply lines now about 1,000 miles in length, but much of that supply came to the 6th Army and arrived via horse-drawn wagons. The transport of supplies was also slowed by the railways of the Soviet Union, as they were of a smaller gauge (width) than the rest of Europe. As a result, cargo had to be transferred. Soviet partisans were also growing in strength and organization, and they increasingly interrupted the flow of supplies to all the German forces in the USSR.

In addition to food and ammunition, this meant that replacements had to travel an exceptional distance, as well as replacement parts and fuel. As the campaign wore on, and the weather turned, supply logistics became one of the largest problems facing the Germans at Stalingrad.

Making matters even worse for the Germans was a complete intelligence lapse regarding Soviet strength. They had underestimated Stalin's power in 1941, but due to the factors mentioned above, they were able to defeat the Red Army in battle after battle. At the Battle of Moscow, which began in September 1941, the Germans believed the Soviets were on their last legs—

and then the Red Army attacked with a fresh force of over 250,000 men. This happened over and over during the war with the USSR.

In the spring of 1942, German intelligence estimated the total Soviet aircraft to be just over 6,500. The reality (and this does include some obsolete and non-combat aircraft) was that the Soviets had over 20,000. The Germans also believed the Soviets were roughly on par with them in terms of tanks, which was around 6,000. Again, the reality was far different: it was nearly 25,000 on all fronts. Lastly, Soviet artillery was far stronger than the Germans believed, as they thought the Reds possessed nearly 8,000 guns. The Soviets actually possessed more than 30,000. (Artillery was produced in unbelievable quantities in the USSR during the war. At the Battle of Berlin in 1945, it's estimated that the Soviets had a gun placed every ten yards around the city, accounting for lapses of geography and tactics; this number does not include mortars and the famed "Katyusha" rocket launchers.)

In June 1942, Hitler met with Finnish Marshal Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim, his ally, on the Finn's seventy-fifth birthday in an attempt to coax him to move Finnish forces deeper into the Soviet Union, which Mannerheim refused to do. Part of their conversation was recorded by a Finnish broadcast technician. In the conversation, Hitler admits the Germans grossly underestimated Soviet strength.

"It is evident...evident. They have the most monstrous armament that is humanly conceivable...so...if anybody had told me that one state...if anybody had told me that one state can line up with 35,000 tanks, I had said 'you have gone mad.'"

The totals mentioned above represented the Soviet strength along the entire Eastern Front in the spring of 1942. Just a portion of their power faced German Army Groups A and B during the planned German spring offensive.

While the Soviet Union's strength was immense and growing enormously by the week, the Red Army had sustained unbelievable losses in the first year of the war, and though the Germans had been pushed back or held in place, they were still close to Moscow and just outside Leningrad. The Soviet generals were still hesitant to take the initiative, even though they were slowly being given more leeway to do so by Stalin (who had begun to realize he was not the military genius he believed himself to be). On top of

that, thousands of Soviet towns and cities had been destroyed, and much of its most productive agricultural areas were occupied. And, of course, there were the terrible civilian casualties.

As the Germans pushed eastward, the Soviets began to move as much of their still existing productive capacity to the area of the Ural Mountains, beyond the range of the German bombers. In the spring of 1942, many of these factories were literally operating in open fields by generators. But every day, progress was being made, and within a relatively short time, the factories of the Urals were turning out unreal quantities of weapons, ammunition, and other necessities for the war. Historians who focus on logistics and production consider this Soviet effort to be one of the most miraculous of modern times. It was, of course, achieved at a high cost, both in money and in lives.

Focusing back on the southern front, an estimated 1,700,000 Soviets faced the German forces in the spring and summer of 1942, with possibly one million in reserve far to the rear. These men were in various states of formation, organization, training, and outfitting. Along with the soldiers were some 3,000 to 3,800 tanks, over 1,500 aircraft of all types, and over 16,000 guns, mortars, and rocket launchers.

The Red Army, on paper, was formidable, but they were still on the defensive. Making matters worse was another Soviet intelligence blunder. After the Battle of Stalingrad, Soviet military intelligence would improve vastly for a number of reasons, but before the battle, it suffered from a lack of imagination, hesitancy to report bad news to Stalin, and resources.

The Soviets were relatively sure that the Germans would not be able to mount the same broad offensive as Operation Barbarossa; the Nazis had sustained great casualties as well, though not on the level of the Red Army. As such, Stalin's generals were confident they did not have to fear a repeat of that summer.

However, the Soviet General Staff (known by its Russian language acronym, "STAVKA") was in a quandary. One of its most important cities, Leningrad, was under siege. The Soviet capital, while not under immediate threat, was still obviously a potential target, and the Germans were only 150 to 200 miles from Moscow. Losing either of those cities could possibly be catastrophic, and so, the Soviets reinforced both areas strongly.

In war, as in American or even European football, the team that possesses the ball has a distinct advantage, at least at first, as they know where they're going. Defenders, in football and in war, have to make their best guess and commit. If they commit incorrectly, great damage might be done.

And, in the spring of 1942, the Soviets guessed incorrectly. They had spent much of the winter trying to figure out where the Germans would attack when the good weather came. They gathered and sifted through intelligence of all sorts, and they tried to put themselves in the Germans' shoes. The conclusion that STAVKA came to was that the Germans would make an all-out push toward Moscow. The capital had been the target of the last German effort of 1941, and the men of STAVKA believed it would be so again once the weather improved.

Hitler had determined relatively early in 1942 that his main effort would be in the south, and so, his generals and intelligence services did everything they could to convince the Russians that Moscow was the prize.

Those of you familiar with the Anglo-American effort to fool the Germans in the spring of 1944 as to where they might invade Europe will know that the Allies created fake armies, fake documents (that they "accidentally" let the Germans possess), fake commanders (most notably US General George Patton, who was openly displayed making none too subtle speeches about how he was going to defeat the Germans when the invasion happened), fake radio traffic in codes they knew the Germans had broken, and much more.

The German effort in 1942 was similar, if not as large and detailed. Radio messages were sent in the clear or in codes they knew the Soviets had broken. Suspected Soviet spies were given fake information. Documents were "carelessly" left on the battlefield, and troop movements were simulated along the Moscow front, along with recordings of tank and trucks being played over loudspeakers.

As a result, the Soviets moved significant numbers of troops to the area around Moscow, where the Germans had actually dug in, strengthening their defensive positions. A large portion of the Soviets' industrial production was sent to the Moscow area, and the focus of the Soviet General Staff was the capital. When the German attack began on May 7th, Stalin and his commanders believed it was a feint to lure the Red Army away from Moscow. They were not going to "bite," although they probably should have.

Chapter 3 – The slaughter Begins

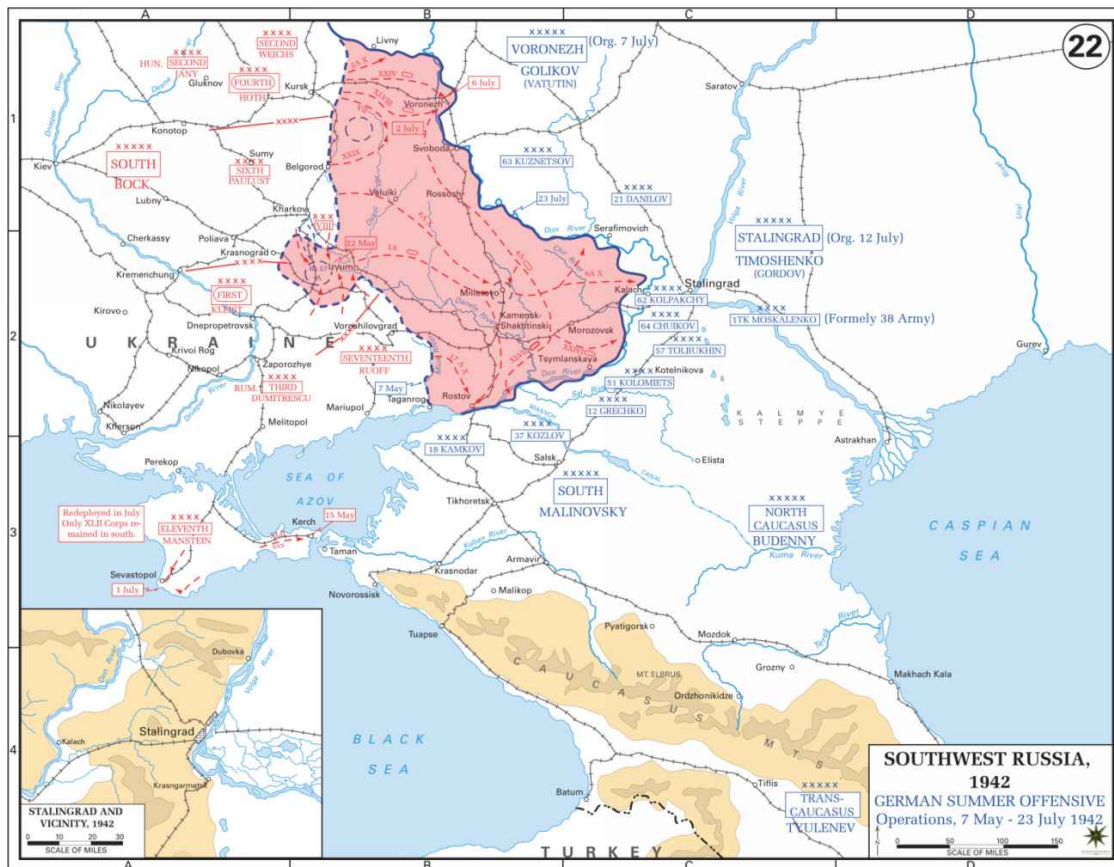


Illustration 4: The German starting point is the blue dotted line. The pink area is what was seized from the Soviets by late July 1942.

Just before Case Blue was to begin, the Soviets began their own attack, which was designed to delay and disrupt what they believed were Germany’s intentions toward Moscow. Many of his generals, who were now allowed to express opinions to a certain degree without fear of being arrested, argued that Stalin was mistaken in his idea that the Germans would be able to launch major attacks on two main fronts. However, Stalin forged ahead and ordered his forces to launch an attack in the area of the Ukrainian cities of Kharkov (today known better by its Ukrainian spelling “Kharkiv”) and Izyum. The attack began on May 12th, 1942.

This attack was launched directly into the area where the Germans were building up forces for the upcoming Case Blue. The Soviet offensive took place on a front of some 50 miles and included over 700,000 men and 1,000 tanks of various types. The German forces in the area numbered some 350,000 men with about 500 tanks and nearly 600 aircraft. Soviet air forces

in the area outnumbered the German, but at this point in the war, and nearly to its end, German pilots demonstrated considerably greater skill and effectiveness than their Soviet counterparts.

The attack initially took the Germans by surprise, but they fell back in good order, and their forces on the northern and southern ends of the Soviet push held. The Germans retreated in the center as well, which created a massive bulge in the lines, as you can see below.

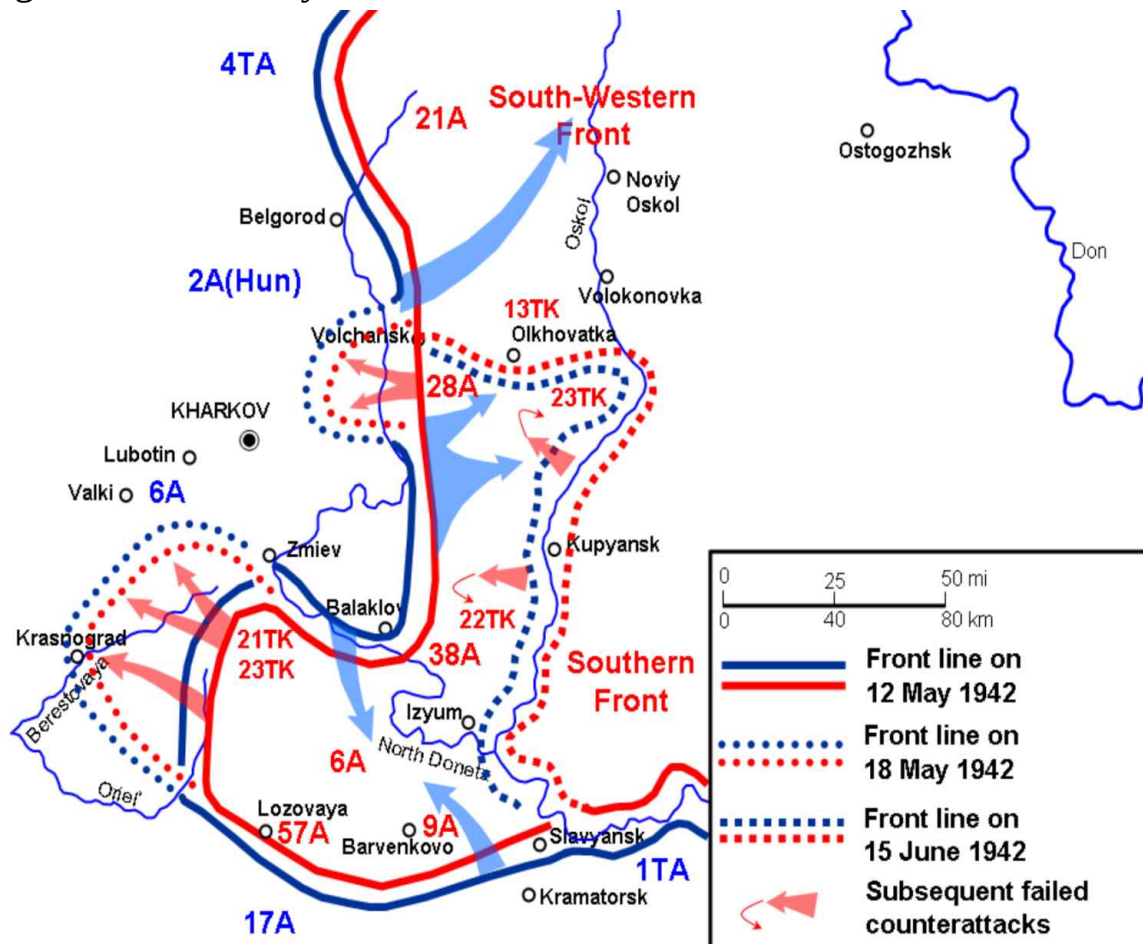


Illustration 5: The Second Battle of Kharkov/Izyum pocket, May/June 1942

This bulge allowed the Germans to do what they had been doing for the entire war, in both the East and the West: out-plan, out-think, and outmaneuver their enemy. On May 17th and 18th, the Germans began their counterattack, which went off in textbook fashion, with excellent coordination between the infantry, armor, artillery, and air forces.

One of the Soviet political officers and Stalin's personal observers in the area was a man named Nikita Khrushchev, who would later become the premier of the Soviet Union in the mid-1950s. Despite local Soviet

commanders pleading for permission to retreat to avoid being encircled by the Nazis, Khrushchev and the overall commander of the Red Army offensive, Marshal Semyon Timoshenko, told Stalin that the situation could be contained and that the Germans could be defeated. These men could not have been more wrong. When the upcoming Battle of Stalingrad began, in which Khrushchev was made the highest-ranking political officer in the city, he made sure that he carried out every order received by Stalin to a “T,” doing so with murderous zeal, partly to save his own neck.

In the end, the Soviet offensive ended in catastrophe. Almost 300,000 men were killed, wounded, or captured, and over 1,000 tanks were destroyed, along with an equal number of aircraft and huge numbers of guns. Not only were the losses high, but the German offensive shattered the morale of the Soviet forces in the area, who began a disorderly and panicked retreat.

The German commander on the northern shoulder of the bulge near Kharkov was General Paulus, who had been busy planning the upcoming German offensive. The German response gave Paulus the opportunity to lead his men in battle and find out what his new command was capable of.

Case Blue Begins

On June 28th, 1942, two weeks after the Soviet attack had been contained and repulsed, the Germans began *Fall Blau*.



Illustration 6: German attacks from July to November 1942. Map courtesy of User: Gdr – based on: Overy, Richard (2019) World War II Map by Map, DK, pp. 148-150 ISBN: 9780241358719., CC BY-SA 3.0 wikipedia commons

One of the foot soldiers taking part in the German offensive was Wilhelm Hoffman of the 267th Infantry Regiment of the 94th Infantry Division, 6th Army. Hoffman is remembered for his personal diary, which was discovered after the war. It is one of the few surviving memoirs of the personal experiences of a German soldier as the Battle of Stalingrad happened. Hoffman was killed shortly after Christmas 1942—his personal effects, including his diary, were sent home.

His diary starts off cheerily, reflecting the high morale of the Germans as they began their drive to defeat the Soviets. In the words of Hoffman, “take Stalingrad, and then the war will be over for us.” On July 29th, Hoffman wrote, “the company commander says that the Russian troops are completely broken and cannot hold out much longer. To reach the Volga

and take Stalingrad is not so difficult for us. The Führer knows where the Russians' weak point is. Victory is not far away.”

And it appeared that way to many in the German 6th Army. Well, perhaps not to some of the more grizzled veterans, who had been fighting since the previous year's invasion. They, too, had been told that it was likely only a matter of months, maybe even weeks, before the Soviets gave in. These veterans knew that two of the most important German objectives, Leningrad and Moscow, were still in Soviet hands, and although the Soviets lost millions, they seemed to keep putting fresh men into the field. And though the Red Army had been mostly retreating, their defense was getting more stubborn and more skilled by the day. At Sebastopol in Crimea, the Soviets withstood a German siege for months, and though it would fall just before the commencement of Case Blue, the Russian defense there had been fanatical. There was even an incident in which political commissars and other officers detonated charges in the underground ammunition caverns, where they and hundreds of civilians and soldiers were holed up. These detonations killed virtually everyone, but the Soviets would rather have this happen than be taken as prisoners. All of this gave the German veterans pause, but still, they had had the Soviets on the run for most of the last year. On August 2nd, Hoffman wrote, “What great spaces the Soviets occupy, what rich fields are to be had here after the war's over! ... I believe that the Führer will carry the thing through to a successful end.” On August 10th, he wrote, “The Führer's orders were read out to us. He expects victory of us. We are all convinced that they can't stop us.”

As the Germans advanced, sometimes forty or more miles in a day, Hitler's confidence rose. On July 17th, the Germans were victorious in a large battle on the Chir River near Kalach, about ninety miles from Stalingrad. This victory reinforced Hitler's belief that the Soviets were nearly finished, and he made what some believe to be a fatal error (the first of many at Stalingrad): he took apart his weakened but still considerable 11th Army and sent parts of it north to help in the siege of Leningrad. In hindsight, these forces could have been used more effectively and perhaps more decisively at Stalingrad.

As the Germans advanced, the Red Army gave way before them, retreating over the wide Don River where it bends to the south and at its closest point to Stalingrad and the Volga. The retreat away from the Don River meant that the Soviets had no natural obstacles behind which to set up a strong

defense. The next truly defensible position was Stalingrad itself. If the Soviets retreated across to the eastern side of the Volga, the war might end, as the Germans would cut off one of the USSR's main lifelines and be free to move south into the Caucasus without fear of an attack on their northern flank.

Order #227

That being the case, Josef Stalin issued a directive: "Order #227," sometimes known as the "Not one step back" order. The directive itself was never published and distributed publicly. Stalin did read it over the airwaves, and his subordinates were very aware of its contents, among which was the establishment of penal battalions for each "front" grouping. (In the Soviet system of command, the "front," such as the newly formed "Bryansk Front" and "Voronezh Front" in the area near Stalingrad, were equivalent to the Germany "Army Group.") These penal battalions would be made up of men who were deemed to have been shirking their duty, irresponsible, or had committed crimes. The penal battalions, for the most part, were a death sentence, as these men carried out the most dangerous assignments (like defusing mines under German fire), though Stalin did give these men "an opportunity to redeem by blood their crimes against the Motherland."

Order #227 also established "blocking detachments," which would be made up of men from the secret police. These units were empowered to shoot men retreating without orders or round them up to send to the penal battalions.

The order also authorized the immediate arrest of any officer—of any grade—who either ordered unauthorized retreats or accepted the retreat of their units without orders. Most of these men were taken away and shot, though some did end up in the penal battalions, where the majority died.

In the first three months of the battle in Stalingrad, blocking detachments shot an estimated 1,000 men and sent almost 25,000 to penal battalions. By October, the front lines had begun to stabilize, and the blocking detachments were slowly phased out, though they remained a part of the Soviet armed forces until 1944.

Stalin rewrote the order himself after his generals had come up with a very sterile document without any real patriotic feeling. Here are some examples:

“Some stupid people at the front calm themselves with talk that we can retreat further to the east, as we have a lot of territory, a lot of ground, a lot of population and that there will always be much bread for us. They want to justify the infamous behavior at the front. But such talk is a falsehood, helpful only to our enemies.”

“Therefore it is necessary to eliminate talk that we have the capability endlessly to retreat, that we have a lot of territory, that our country is great and rich, that there is a large population, and that bread always will be abundant. Such talk is false and parasitic, it weakens us and benefits the enemy, if we do not stop retreating we will be without bread, without fuel, without metal, without raw material, without factories and plants, without railways. This leads to the conclusion, it is time to finish retreating. Not one step back! Such should now be our main slogan.”

Historians argue the effect of the order, saying that by the time of the Battle of Stalingrad, it was apparent to almost everyone that retreat was not an option and that losing the city could possibly lead to losing oil, the Volga, and the war. Others argue the order was necessary after all the defeats in the south, as well as the considerable setbacks elsewhere since the beginning of the war. They believe harsh discipline was needed to stop a panic.

Later in the battle, and in the war, the Germans adopted the use of blocking units and summary execution. Penal battalions had been a fact of life in the German Army for some time.

August 23rd, 1942

The *Luftwaffe* launched nearly 2,000 sorties over Stalingrad (a “sortie” is an individual flight—if a plane flew five sorties, it flew five times), employing medium and dive bombers. Many of the bombs that dropped on Stalingrad were incendiary, and in addition to the explosions of these and other ordnances, much of the city was destroyed in one day.

The smoke from the city rose two miles into the air and could be seen miles away. It was a devastating attack. Stalingrad’s pre-war population was about 850,000 to 900,000. The numbers of dead given for the bombing raid, which lasted from August 23rd to August 25th, range from about 900 to over 40,000. After comparing similar raids on similar-sized cities throughout the war and examining Soviet documents after the fall of the Soviet Union, most researchers put the total between 10,000 to 15,000 people.

When the Germans finished bombing, Stalingrad was essentially “gone.” Most of its largest buildings were now mere shells filled with rubble. The streets likewise disappeared, filled with debris from fallen buildings. The poorer civilian areas on the outskirts of the city and in its southern parts, which was mostly composed of wood, were gone. Some buildings did remain, but they were few and heavily damaged.

Stalingrad’s downtown, which was considered to be beautiful by many before the war, was demolished. Some of its factories sustained great damage, but they managed to keep producing, sometimes without roofs or most of their walls.

The *Luftwaffe* command believed that they had won the battle before it had even properly started, and German soldiers, watching wave after wave of bombers fly over Stalingrad, wondered how anything could survive. Many expected they would just march into the city and take it.

They couldn’t have been more wrong, for what the *Luftwaffe* actually did was create fortresses—fortresses of rubble. The collapsed buildings managed to form “highways” through the rubble, and throughout the battle, the Soviets (and later the Germans) created more. The rubble also provided built-in strong points and bunkers. Aerial reconnaissance was made almost useless. The rubble also allowed snipers to disappear within the ruins and repeatedly strike without ever being seen. The Soviets had been training thousands of snipers before the war even began, both men and women, so they were skilled and dangerous.

Famously, despite all of the damage, one of Stalingrad’s most recognizable statues, that of a group of small children playing in one of the city’s main squares, survived. You can see it below, with a picture of it then and now.



Many people believe that Stalin ordered no civilians to be evacuated from the city before the battle began, with his belief being that his soldiers would fight harder if civilians remained among them. This is not true. Civilian evacuations began the day after the first German bombing. Within the first days, over 100,000 people were sent eastward over the Volga to relative safety. More followed during the first part of the battle, when it could be managed.

However, many refused to go, voluntarily remaining at their factory jobs and helping the army and the medics. Many of those who lived in the city's outskirts fell under German control. Sometimes they were treated decently, sometimes not. Many times, they were just ignored. Within the city, many took to the basements that still existed or lived in factories. Some even made "homes" within the rubble. Still, when the battle was over in February, the civilian population of Stalingrad numbered an estimated 2,000 to 5,000 people, a far cry of what it had held before. The rest were either evacuated or killed.



Illustration 7: Stalingrad in the spring after the battle, 1943

Chapter 4 – Soldiers and Generals

You have already read about German General Friedrich Paulus. Paulus, along with his comrades Field Marshal Erich von Manstein and General Herman Hoth, are the most recognizable names among the Germans at Stalingrad. Of course, for military historians, many other German soldiers are well known, for, though they ultimately lost the battle, the Germans within Stalingrad fought bravely against some harsh odds.

As the Germans pushed toward the city, they faced resistance from a number of Soviet units. Driving into the outskirts and into the downtown area, they were up against two Soviet armies: the 62nd and the 64th. From July to August 1942, General Vasily Chuikov commanded the 64th, and in August, the command was given to General Mikhail Shumilov, who commanded the army through the rest of the battle. Shumilov would fight until the end of the war and receive distinction in various positions.

Up until September 11th, the 62nd Army was commanded by Generals Vladimir Kolpachy (July to August 1942) and Anton Lopatin (August to September 1942). These men were able, and they ended the war as “Heroes of the Soviet Union,” but as the battle began to rage within the city, Stalin determined a different kind of commander needed to take charge of the 62nd. This man was the former commander of the 64th Army: Vasily Chuikov.



Illustration 8: Vasily Chuikov before Stalingrad

In the United States, Generals Dwight D. Eisenhower, George S. Patton, and Douglas MacArthur are held up as heroic leaders during WWII. In the United Kingdom, it's Field Marshals Bernard Montgomery and Harold Alexander. In the Soviet Union, Marshal Georgy Zhukov, Marshal Ivan Konev, and General (later Marshal) Vasily Chuikov (with some others) are lionized. These men, through their own performance and the added efforts of the Soviet propaganda machine, were made into almost superhumans, and they are regarded in the same way today.

Chuikov was born in 1900, near Moscow. He died in 1982 and is buried on Mamayev Kurgan, a height overlooking Stalingrad (now Volgograd). It is one of the most famous sites of the Battle of Stalingrad. In addition to being awarded the "Hero of the Soviet Union" (the USSR's highest honor) twice, Chuikov was also given the Distinguished Service Cross from the United States for his actions at Stalingrad.

In 1917, the year of the Bolshevik Revolution, Chuikov and his brother joined the revolutionary Red Guards. In 1918, he joined the Red Army proper. Though the Red Army was new, and many of its commander quite young, Chuikov, at the age of eighteen, quickly rose to deputy company commander in the Russian Civil War, and the next year, he commanded a regiment in Siberia.

Chuikov was wounded four times during the Russian Civil War. One of these wounds caused his left arm to become partially paralyzed for life, and a fragment remained in it until the end of his days. It actually caused the infection that killed him in 1982. Chuikov was awarded the "Order of the Red Banner" twice for bravery.

In the 1920s, Chuikov, along with many other Soviet officers, served as advisors to the Chinese Army (the Nationalists). There, he led the Soviet forces in a large battle against a powerful local warlord in northern China for control of the Soviet Far Eastern Railway. During the beginning of China's war with Japan in the 1930s, Chuikov was sent again to help the Chinese in their fight against the Japanese and to help ensure the Chinese remained in the war to keep Japan from attacking the USSR.

In 1939, Chuikov commanded the 4th Army in Stalin's invasion of Poland, as well as the 9th Army in the Russo-Finnish War, both with distinction.

As the commander of the 64th Army, Chuikov had forestalled a major German attack, which allowed the 62nd Army to avoid encirclement.

Already well known to Stalin for being a skilled and particularly hard-nosed commander, Chuikov was given command of the 62nd Army and what remained of the 1st Tank Army when the fighting erupted in Stalingrad proper.

Right from the start, Chuikov sent a message to his troops. There would be no more retreating. He personally told Stalin's "eyes and ears" in the city, Nikita Khrushchev, that "I'll either keep them [the Germans] out, or die trying." This was meant not only for him but for his officers and men as well. Chuikov knew how dire the situation at Stalingrad was, not only locally but for the war effort in general. To that end, he had a significant number of officers and men executed for cowardice.

At the beginning of the battle, Chuikov saw one of his main tasks as adding "backbone" to the Red Army units under his command. During the latter part of the battle, he was interviewed, in which he said, "To be honest, most of the divisional commanders didn't really want to die in Stalingrad. The second something went wrong, they'd start saying: 'Permit me to cross the Volga.' I would yell 'I'm still here' and send a telegram: 'One step back and I'll shoot you!'"

At one point in the battle, the Soviets controlled a mere 10 percent of the city, and much of that was under Chuikov's command. Nearby oil storage facilities were above and around his command bunker. At some point, one or more of these was set alight, and flaming oil poured down the hill into the Soviet trenches and bunkers. Chuikov dutifully and courageously remained in his command bunker, not knowing whether he was about to be roasted alive. The flames burned directly above his HQ.

Chuikov is credited with developing the tactic that may have kept the Soviets from losing the battle. Known as "hugging the enemy," he ordered his men to use the buildings, rubble, sewer tunnels, and newly dug trenches to stay as close to the enemy as possible. This was done to mitigate the German advantage (in the first part of the battle, at least) in tanks, guns, and planes. Coming so close to the Germans meant that the Nazis were frequently unable to bring their heavier weapons to bear for fear of hitting their own men. Stalingrad became an exceptionally brutal battle as a result of this, and the casualties were astronomical.

One of Chuikov's main tasks was to keep the crossing at the Volga River open, as he controlled the west bank of the river. This is how

reinforcements and supplies were brought into the city and how wounded and civilians were brought out. Due to Chuikov's efforts, the Soviets fed enough reinforcements into the city to keep the Germans busy. As one can probably tell, Chuikov is considered to be one of the greatest heroes at Stalingrad.

Soldiers: The German *Landser*

The average German foot soldier on the march toward Stalingrad in the summer of 1942 carried his own weapon, which, most of the time, was the famed Mauser K (for "karbine") .98 (for 1898, the year in which the model was developed). Some non-commissioned officers, lieutenants, captains, and special assault units would have been equipped with what the American GIs called the "Burr Gun," named for the sound it made. This was the Maschinenpistole ("machine pistol" or "submachine gun") 40 (for 1940), or the MP 40. It is sometimes incorrectly referred to as the "Schmeisser," after Hugo Schmeisser, who had developed one of the first German submachine guns in 1918, but the design of the MP 40 did not involve Schmeisser.

The Germans also employed large numbers of heavy and medium machine guns, most famously the MG 42, which was sometimes called "Hitler's buzz saw" for the terrifying sound it made. The MG 42 was so effective that versions of it are still in use in many of today's armed forces, particularly in Europe. The smaller MG 34 was equally effective.

The plains of southern Russia are hot in the summer and freezing in the winter. The Germans' uniforms were completely inadequate for the winter, but they faced problems during the summer as well. For the men heading toward Stalingrad, who were mostly doing so on foot, the sun was relentless, and the plains offered very little shade. Not helping was the fact that it was quite hot in the summer. Marching in the sometimes 90°F heat, the *Landser* (the nickname for a German infantryman) carried a wool blanket and groundsheet, his famous (but heavy) "coal scuttle" helmet, and a full ammunition belt. On his back would be a leather rucksack, which held his small shovel. A gas mask would be around his neck or hooked to his belt. As a side note, many German soldiers threw away their gas masks, as the use of gas during WWII was virtually nonexistent—although smoke and other pollutants, especially in the burning, rotten environment of Stalingrad, were often always present. In his hand or strapped elsewhere, he would have a cloth bag, which carried spare socks, underwear, and personal items.

Officers and non-commissioned officers might carry a variety of sidearms and their ammo. As the men approached a battle, grenades would be supplied, but oftentimes, one or two were carried in their belt. A combat knife and a canteen would hang from the ammunition belt. If the soldier was in the engineers, or if he was specially tasked, he might carry an anti-personnel or anti-tank mine, but generally, these and other equipment, like the field kitchen, were carried on horse-drawn wagons or sometimes vehicles. All in all, the *Landser* carried between forty to fifty-five pounds of equipment with him on the march.

Up until late 1943 and early 1944, the German soldier was perhaps the best-prepared and best-trained soldier in the world. Toward the war's end, the amazing numbers of casualties cut short training times and increased the number of men entering the armed forces. These men were often quite young and inexperienced, diminishing the army's effectiveness.



Illustration 9: Typical equipment and uniform of a German soldier, 1942/43

Soldiers: The Soviet “Ivan”

The Soviet soldier was known as “Ivan” by both his enemies and his allies. Even within the Red Army, a soldier whose name was not known to his new company might be briefly called “Ivan” in the same way a US soldier might have been called “Joe.” Ivan is the Russian equivalent to “John,” and it was the most common name in the USSR and often tops the list of baby names in today’s Russia and Ukraine. By the time the war broke out in 1941, the Germans had lived and been indoctrinated with Nazi propaganda for eight years. As a result, they viewed this “Ivan” as someone primitive, a brute who scraped by on the steppes of Russia. “Ivan” was tough, which he had to be, for his own government was his worst enemy in peacetime. Despite the gains made by the Soviet Union in the 1930s, the USSR was still a relatively poor country, and whether you lived in the city as a worker or toiled in the fields, the mines, or any other physical job, you had to be tough.

At the start of the war, hundreds of thousands of Soviets became prisoners of war. Besides being poorly led, outfought, and outmaneuvered, many Red Army men gave up simply because they hated Stalin’s regime, which may have been even more repressive than Hitler’s. However, most soon realized that being taken prisoner by the Nazis was a death sentence. Escapees told of beatings, mass shootings, starvation, and much more. Civilian refugees fleeing the Nazis told the same stories. This helped to stiffen the resolve of the Red Army.

By the time of Stalingrad and Order #227, most “Ivans” were ready to fight to the death and take as many Germans with them as possible. In the street fights that broke out in Stalingrad, “Ivan” essentially became a human weapon, one that the Germans greatly feared.

The situation for the Soviet soldier depended on a lot. Was he a veteran soldier in an established unit? Was he a veteran in a unit that had been beaten or disbanded? Or was he a new recruit? The answers to these questions often dictated the equipment that one received.

In many books, documentaries, and even in the movie *Enemy at the Gates*, Soviet soldiers were hustled to the front lines without any weapons at all. This was true, and not just at Stalingrad. This had also been the case at Leningrad in the winter of 1941, as well as other places in the first half of

the war in the USSR. These recruits, some of them with virtually no training whatsoever, were told to stick close to the man in front of them, who *might* have a weapon, and grab it when he fell. Or they could always take one from a corpse. The average lifespan for the Soviet recruit during the worst days of Stalingrad, which were the months of August, September, and October 1942, was *seven minutes* on the front lines.

The decently outfitted Soviet soldier at Stalingrad could be expected to carry a wool blanket into battle. The blanket would be rolled and draped over the chest and back and tied at the ends. He wore or carried his helmet and sometimes had a garrison hat slipped through his belt. He also wore a rough linen long-sleeved shirt under a quilted jacket. Woolen trousers were worn with the pant legs stuffed into valenki, Russian crushed felt peasant boots, which were great in the winter. Footcloths, not socks, were worn and carried. These were long slips of linen or other cloth wrapped around the foot to the calf under the boots. Many times, Soviet soldiers made do with shoes from home, although they also took them from dead comrades or enemies. Leather boots in the jackboot style (like the Germans) were also worn, especially toward the war's end when supplies were more plentiful.

Heavy wool greatcoats were issued in winter when they were available. The Soviet soldier was generally better prepared for the cold, but he was not impervious to it, especially when he did not have the right equipment. Frostbite was just as much a threat to the Soviets as the Germans.

“Ivan” might carry a number of bags, either tied to his belt or perhaps rolled within his blanket. These might carry a shelter-half (one half of a tent to be paired with that of another soldier), an extra shirt, and other personal items, as well as his canteen, knife, and shovel.



Illustration 10: This modern Russian reenactor wears an accurate Soviet WWII-era uniform and equipment.

“Ivan” carried two main versions of the rugged and accurate Mosin-Nagant rifle during the war, which also made an excellent sniper rifle when equipped with a scope. Only officers wore sidearms; this did not include non-commissioned officers. “Ivan” would carry spare clips for his rifle in his wide pockets or sometimes in an ammunition belt, where he might also slide in a grenade or two (for those familiar with weaponry of WWII, the Soviet grenades resembled the famed German “potato masher”).

Another famous symbol of the Soviets in WWII was the PPSH-41 (in Russian, *pistolet-pulemyot Shpagina*—“Shpagin machine pistol”). The PPSH-41, created by Georgy Shpagin, was sometimes called a *papasha* for the sound of its acronym. In Russian, *papasha* means “daddy.” The most recognizable version of the machine gun was equipped with a 71-round drum magazine, though by the time the war ended, most of these weapons carried a 35-round box magazine. The weapon was easy to mass-produce, and it was rugged and accurate enough. German soldiers prized the weapon,

and they sometimes issued them from captured Soviet stories or tried to take them from enemies on the battlefield.

Below, you can see the MP 40 on the top and the PPSH on the bottom.



During the Battle of Stalingrad, the Germans had real problems with their weapons and vehicles freezing up. The Soviets, on the other hand, did not, for one very clever reason. The oil in vehicles will thicken and freeze in extreme cold, making the vehicle useless. The only remedy for this was to keep the vehicle running all the time, something which, especially for the Germans, cost a lot of fuel. Likewise, guns, from the smallest to the largest cannons, needed to be oiled to work smoothly. The Germans frequently found their weapons and guns frozen solid and useless. The Soviets would add small amounts of gasoline to the oil of vehicles and weapons, which kept them from freezing. This small trick might have saved hundreds of Soviet lives and ruined hundreds of German ones.

Chapter 5 – Schlacht an der Wolga

In German, the word for struggle, battle, or fight is *Kampf*. Sometimes, however, you will see the word *Schlacht* referring to a battle. *Schlacht* means “slaughter,” and you will hardly ever see Stalingrad referred to as anything else in that language. It wasn’t really a fight or a battle, but it can definitely be considered a slaughter, and not just because the Germans lost. Stalingrad was a place of slaughter. In the space of about six months, nearly a million people died, and another million were wounded or missing.

In even the most graphic of war movies, one cannot get the sense of what fighting or living in Stalingrad was like. Even in relatively realistic movies, like the German *Stalingrad* (1993) or *Enemy at the Gates* (2001), one cannot see, smell, or hear what the men fighting there did.

Because the fighting was so intense virtually all of the time, most of those killed in battle remained where they died or were blown apart. The men left alive had to navigate through streets, alleys, and buildings covered in human organs and limbs. Those wounded in “no man’s land” were left in between the two armies, often screaming their lungs out for hours. Neither side was above wounding a man and leaving him somewhere as “bait” for his comrades. This was done with prisoners as well.

Lice were everywhere, and in the winter, swarms of them made directly for the armpits and crotches of the soldiers, where it was warm. They made the soldiers miserable and helped to spread disease.

The population of rats also multiplied. Like many of their fathers had in the trenches and no man’s lands of WWI, soldiers had to watch their dead and dying comrades be eaten by rats and sometimes packs of dogs.



Illustration 11: Soviets make their way through the rubble of the city

The fighting in Stalingrad is remembered for a number of things. First, it was the turning point in the war. Unlike so many pivotal points in history, whose importance is sometimes only recognized years afterward, both sides seemed to know that this battle could possibly decide the war. In Catherine Merridale’s excellent book about the life of Soviet soldiers during the war, *Ivan’s War* (2007), she tells how even the rank and file seemed to know that Stalingrad would be the turning point. One man wrote home, “Without exception, we are all worried about Stalingrad. If the enemy succeeds in taking it, we will all suffer.” Another said, “I am writing to you from a historic place at an historic time.”

Second, the fighting, to a great degree, was up close and personal. Because Chuikov and other Soviet commanders had told their men to “hug the enemy” and not give an inch of ground, the buildings themselves became miniature battlefields. Sometimes one side would hold one floor, while the other side took the one below, above, or both. The men took to calling this a “layer-cake battle.”

The most famous example of such a battle took place at what became known as “Pavlov’s House.” Today, only a wall of the building stands in Stalingrad (now known as Volgograd), and it is a revered monument.



Illustration 12: The remains and memorial of Pavlov’s House today



Illustration 13: Sergeant Yakov Pavlov

Sergeant Yakov Pavlov commanded the platoon that seized the house, and they held it for sixty days. The house held an important position forward of the main Soviet lines, and from it, the “Ivans” inside could see virtually 360 degrees around, as the building was located in an area with wide streets, squares, and avenues. This allowed the men inside to radio Soviet command about German troop movements in the area. They also used runners at times, who had to make their way through the German lines.

Initially, the Germans tried to drive the Soviets out with tanks, but they soon learned that the Panzers were highly vulnerable to attacks from above, where their armor was the thinnest. In early 1941, the Soviets developed a one-man anti-tank rifle, the PTRD-41. This weapon proved ineffective for the most part, but it was effective against lightly armored half-tracks or command vehicles. The rifle, which had a scoped range of 1,000 yards, did prove to be a somewhat useful sniper rifle, although its loud noise and the dust it launched into the air gave the sniper’s position away quickly. Against heavier tanks, it was useless—except when fired from above through the thinly roofed turret. This, combined with hundreds of flammable “Molotov cocktails,” meant that the German tanks were stopped in their tracks numerous times.

As a result, the Germans had to send infantry attack after infantry attack to capture Pavlov’s House. At times, the Germans would be cut down by the

score as they approached the house. Other times, they made it inside but only for a while. There, the fighting that made the Battle of Stalingrad so notable took place, as it did over and over again for months. The Germans might take a floor or even two, only to be met with grenades raining down on them from above. Hand-to-hand fighting, a hallmark of Stalingrad, took place regularly, and people fought with sharpened shovels, knives, and picks.

At times during the sixty days, reinforcements would be sent in. Sometimes they would be sent back, with the remaining men from Pavlov's unit telling them they would not leave unless it was in a bag. Still, attrition did take its toll, and more men were sent in. When it was possible, men would sneak through the ruins at night, bringing ammunition, weapons, food, and water. Of course, many men did not make it.

After two months of fighting, the main Soviet lines were able to move forward and relieve Pavlov's men. Sergeant Pavlov and many of the defenders were awarded multiple times for their defense of the building. Pavlov himself became a deputy to the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Republic; he died in 1981. (For you gamers out there, the original *Call of Duty* featured some sites from the Eastern Front. One of the maps is "Pavlov's House.")

The third reason the Battle of Stalingrad is so well remembered today is the snipers that fought there. Of course, the most famous sniper in Stalingrad was Vasily Zaitsev, whose story was told in William Gates's book, *Enemy at the Gates* (1974), and in the 2001 movie of the same name.

Zaitsev's story became so monumental that it is hard to discern what is fact and what is fiction. According to the official line, Zaitsev's kills mounted daily and were promoted in Soviet propaganda. Between his kills and those of the many other Soviet snipers in the city, the Germans were losing an amazing number of officers and signalmen. What is not talked about as much is that the Germans had an extraordinary number of snipers in the city as well, some of them very good. However, the story that has been passed down through time is that Major Erwin König, the head of a "German sniper school," was sent to Stalingrad. His sole purpose was to hunt down and kill Zaitsev. According to the official Soviet story, and Zaitsev himself, after days of pursuing his target, the German was killed by Zaitsev after he spotted the glint of König's scope under a pile of rubble. The only problem is this never happened.

But what did happen? Zaitsev, a shepherd's son from the Ural Mountains who protected his flock by shooting wolves, did, in fact, kill 225 German soldiers in Stalingrad, plus almost a dozen more before the battle. However, because the Soviets knew that Stalingrad might be the pivotal battle of the war, they set about embellishing Zaitsev's story. He became the Soviet "everyman." After all, Zaitsev's story was relatable; he was just a poor shepherd's son. But even the poorest Russian could rise to greatness in the USSR in the struggle against fascism.

To make the story more personal and dramatic, the propaganda machine of the Soviet Union kicked into high gear and created the Major König story. No records in the well-kept German archives indicate there ever was a Major Erwin König—all of it was fiction. But why did Zaitsev insist it was true? There are three likely reasons. The first is the most likely. In Stalin's Soviet Union, when you were told to do something, you did it. Second, Zaitsev began to believe the story over time, which is a well-known phenomenon. Third, he enjoyed the fame and notoriety that came with it.

It doesn't really matter if the story isn't true. What is true is that Zaitsev and the other Soviet snipers made life a living hell for the Germans in Stalingrad. And these snipers weren't all male. During the war, 800,000 Soviet women fought in the front lines or in the air, and many of them were snipers. Some of them were very good and had higher kill totals than Vasily Zaitsev when the war ended.

Zaitsev died in 1991 at the age of seventy-six. He was buried on Mamayev Kurgan, along with Chuikov and many other heroes of the battle.



Illustration 14: Zaitsev's rifle in Stalingrad Battle Museum today

There is another interesting tale that seems to pop up. This story is about a young Soviet boy who was an apprentice shoemaker. There are various versions of it. You see one in *Enemy at the Gates*, there is another in the 1993 German film *Stalingrad*, and you can find more in literature. Either way, the story ends the same way. The young shoemaker, caught behind German lines, repairs the Nazis' boots. He observes them and listens in with his basic knowledge of German. He then feeds information back to the Russians, but he is eventually found out and hanged (or shot) by the Germans. There is probably some truth to the story somewhere.

Jumping back to the battle at hand, Stalingrad is also known for the battles that took place in the factories of the city. The three largest factories were the Stalingrad Tractor Factory, the Red October Factory, and the Barrikady Factory. Each of these factories, which were more like giant factory complexes than just one building, produced vital war supplies and did so during the battle unless they were captured. To capture them, the Germans brought in highly trained units of assault engineers from other fronts.

Fighting in the factory complexes was like a war within itself. At or near the Tractor Factory complex alone, an estimated 30,000 men died in three months. Think about that for a moment. In the *ten years* of the Vietnam War, the United States lost an estimated 58,000 men. With the casualties from all three factory buildings put together, it is likely 100,000 people lost their lives. Like the battles in the streets and buildings, these fights sometimes involved groups of Soviets on one side of a wall and Germans on the other.

Lastly, to supply the defenders of Stalingrad, the Soviets had only one choice: to bring in supplies and men from across the Volga, Europe's largest river. To do so, they had to run a gauntlet of German air and artillery attacks, which took a heavy toll. Boats that succeeded in making it to the city would bring out civilians, the wounded, and messages, among other things. They sometimes would not make it back to where they started, but as the battle went on, Soviet air defenses over the river grew in strength, making the voyage a bit safer before the river froze over in the dead of winter.

Chapter 6 – The Germans Get Beaten at Their Own Game

While the 6th Army was fighting in Stalingrad, the German drive in the Caucasus went on. The fighting there was hard, but it was not on the same level as Stalingrad. The Germans drove about halfway down the peninsula, sometimes fighting in beautiful Middle Eastern style cities laced with palm and orange trees, and at other times fighting in the unforgiving atmosphere of the snow-covered Caucasus Mountains. They never reached Baku and its rich oil fields. Although they did reach some of the smaller oil fields in the area, they found the equipment destroyed and the fields on fire. Even if the Germans had taken the area, it might have been months or even years before they could have made the area productive again.

By the end of December, the Nazis knew they were doomed if they stayed where they were, for the Soviets had turned the tables on Hitler in the area of Stalingrad.

On November 13th, 1942, Stalin approved Operation Uranus. In Russian myth and astrology, Aquarius was the ruling sign of Russia. The dominant planets of Aquarius were Uranus and Saturn, and it was from this that the Soviets named the operation they believed would inflict a mortal blow on the Germans at Stalingrad.

The planning for the Uranus counterattack had begun in September, at a time when things were looking very bad for the Red Army. But the STAVKA realized a number of things in their favor. Firstly, the German supply lines were seriously overstretched. The Russians knew how much supply was being destroyed or captured by the partisans on its way to Stalingrad.

Second, the German prisoners were in increasingly bad shape. These men had expected a quick victory and instead got a butcher's yard. As the fall went on and the weather got colder, the Soviets realized that their prisoners were getting thinner and sicker. One thing many people do not know about the Stalingrad campaign is that the Germans and their Hungarian, Romanian, and Italian allies suffered from an epidemic of tularemia. Tularemia is a rodent-borne disease native to the steppes of Southern Russia, Ukraine, and Central Asia. Most Soviet troops had been vaccinated for it, but the Germans didn't seem to know about it until it was too late.

Tularemia attacks many areas of the body, including the lungs, lymph nodes, eyes, and skin. It can be fatal if not diagnosed and treated early. The disease, in addition to making one extremely uncomfortable (symptoms include itching, chills, and fever), also leads to massive headaches and exhaustion. The soldiers infected by tularemia often died.

Third, the Russians knew (as the Germans should have) that winter was coming. Even though it was their second winter of the war, the Germans were radically underprepared. However, the Soviets were ready. In the winter of 1942/43, temperatures reached -40°F . The illustration below, which was made before the end of WWI, shows an old Russian “ally,” known to all as “General Winter.”



Illustration 15: “General Winter” sweeps Russia’s enemies before him

Fourth, the Soviets were aware of the deployment of Axis forces in the city and to the north and south of it. In Stalingrad itself, where the fighting was the most intense, one would see the Germans fighting. To the north and south, the Hungarians and Romanians (who often had to be kept apart by units of Italians and second-rate German troops because of the enmity between them) held the line. The troops of both of these countries had, at times, fought hard, especially at the outset of the war, when they seized lands in southern Russia and Ukraine, which were promised to them by

Hitler. However, as the war ground on, their morale and willingness to fight decreased. On top of this, they were equipped with outdated weapons and had virtually no anti-tank weapons of any worth. Below, you can find images of Hungarian (top) and Romanian (bottom) soldiers.



Lastly, the Soviets knew that they had millions of more men in the training pipeline and in reserve, which was something the Germans just couldn't believe. One million of these men were detailed for the upcoming operation, a more strategic move than throwing them into the city one by one.

Operation Uranus was the product of much planning and much secrecy. Only two men, Stalin and the chief of staff of the Red Army, Marshal Boris Shaposhnikov, knew the entire plan. The commanders on the various fronts only knew the relevant parts of the plan. There were three main Soviet fronts: the "Stalingrad Front" to the south of the city, commanded by General Andrey Yeryomenko; the "Southwest Front" to the north,

commanded by General Nikolai Vatutin; and the “Don Front” within and facing Stalingrad, commanded by General Konstantin Rokossovsky.

For two weeks before the Soviet counteroffensive began, all mail flowing in and out of the area stopped. False radio traffic was set up, allowing the Germans to believe the Russians were almost at the end of their rope. Strict curfews, along with light and sound discipline, were enforced harshly. Most major movements went on only at night with dimmed lights, if any.

For weeks, the Soviets had been carrying out a careful balancing act in Stalingrad itself. They had been feeding just enough men into the city to keep the Germans busy and focused on their goal. All the while, they had been amassing troops on both sides of the ruined metropolis. Those of you familiar with the later career of boxing great Muhammad Ali will recognize this as a massive version of the “Rope-a-Dope,” a move in which Ali would allow his opponent to tire himself out while reserving his own strength for the later rounds when he would deliver a knock-out blow, as with George Foreman in 1974.

Both attacking Soviet fronts had about half a million men. Almost 900 tanks were divided between them, as well as nearly 14,000 guns and 1,500 aircraft. Facing them were about 250,000 Germans (many of them within the city), perhaps 500 guns, 400 serviceable aircraft, and a couple hundred serviceable tanks of various types. Romanian, Hungarian, and Italian forces on the flanks numbered about 500,000 men, but both the German forces and their allies were suffering from hunger, poor morale, bad equipment (especially in the case of the allies), and poor supply. By contrast, Soviet morale was exceedingly high and about to get higher.

On the mornings of November 19th and 20th, the Soviet forces counterattacked in the north first. Then, after the Germans’ attention had been shifted northward, the southern Soviet forces attacked. The weather was bleak throughout all of November. It was far below freezing, and a frozen mist hung above the battlefield, making visibility and hearing poor.

Soviet/Russian propaganda has carefully cultivated an image of hundreds of thousands of white-clad Soviet soldiers on racing T-34 tanks, emerging out of the mists to take the Germans and their allies by complete surprise and sowing terror far behind the front lines. In this case, the propaganda is pretty accurate. Adding to the Germans’ fear was the launching of hundreds of thousands of Katyusha rockets, which were fired just ahead of the

charging tanks. These weapons, called “Stalin’s organ” by the Germans for the eerie sound they made, were not very accurate, but they could discharge hundreds of small artillery shell-sized rockets to saturate a small area, many times destroying everything in their path.

One of the Germans facing the Russians was Gunter Koschorrek, whose memoirs were published in 2011 as *Blood Red Snow: The Memoirs of a German Soldier on the Eastern Front*. He wrote, “Wilke yells, ‘Tanks are coming! In great masses! Swarms of them!’ His last words are drowned out by the noise of the explosions from the shells the tanks are firing at us. Then I see them too! First, it’s like a wall of fire advancing on us, then a horde of brown beetles slowly approaches across the white steppe...So this is what the Soviets have prepared: a colossal tank attack.”

Within hours, the German allies on the flanks, as well as the few German units there, either panicked and fled, were killed, or were taken as prisoners. The Soviet tankers were not hesitant to get their revenge. At times, they would drive on top of an enemy trench or foxhole and then hold one track still while driving the other track forward or backward. This had the effect of spinning the tank, which ground it into the dirt, crushing and grinding anyone unfortunate enough to be underneath. The retreating German troops running across the steppe were purposely run over by the hundreds. Both sides employed this terrifying tactic as the battle progressed.

The Soviets drove far deeper than the Germans could have ever imagined. They crossed the Don River at Kalach, some seventy or so miles from Stalingrad. On November 23rd, the two prongs of the Soviet attack came together in that area. The Germans and their allies in Stalingrad and its vicinity were surrounded, and the nearest German forces were some sixty to seventy miles away.



Illustration 16: Operation Uranus

When Hitler and the German High Command heard the news, they were incredulous. Where had all these men come from? Still, reports came flooding in about the scale of the setback. Almost right away, many of Hitler's generals, both in Germany and in the field, recommended that he order the forces in Stalingrad to attempt a breakout and have the German forces in the Don bend area attack toward them, which would open a gap in the Soviet forces for the remnants of the 6th Army to withdraw through. Hitler refused. Instead, he ordered Paulus to remain in place.

In Stalingrad, Paulus and his staff vacillated between thinking they could hold out until a relief force could be sent, thinking they could break out themselves, and feeling doomed. Of course, with each passing day, the feeling of doom increased.

When the scope of the Soviet counterattack became perfectly clear, Hitler ordered his forces in the Caucasus to withdraw—most of them were already doing so on their own. What was left of Hitler's forces in the Caucasus didn't cross over into Crimea until the spring of 1943. Even at that point, when all reality dictated otherwise, Hitler didn't allow his troops in Kerch to cross over to the Crimean Peninsula because he thought he needed a foothold there for when his troops returned to the area.

Stalingrad was when Hitler really began his descent into "unreality." Over and over again, he ordered his men to stay in the city, believing that his best

general, Erich von Manstein, would break through the Russian lines and help Paulus retake the city.

The Germans argued among themselves until they began an attack on the southern area of the Soviet front, hoping to break through to the city. Paulus was ordered to stay in place. Though many historians have said the best option was for Paulus's forces to breakout to the south to meet Manstein, more recent analyses indicate that almost right from the start, Paulus's half-starved frozen men would have lost 50 percent of their strength. If Hitler had immediately ordered a relief force before the Soviets could dig into their new lines, Paulus might've had a chance. Operation Winter Storm (*Unternehmen Wintergewitter*), the German counterattack, which included 13 divisions (which were mostly under-strength), some 50,000 men, and 250 tanks (including the new "Tiger"), was pretty much doomed from the start. However, the focused nature of the operation and the experience of the German troops and commanders allowed them to penetrate some fifty to sixty miles. But that was about as far as they would go. After being surprised by the German effort, the Soviets reacted strongly, and they stopped the German relief effort in its tracks by December 13th. The offensive had only begun on the 11th.

The almost 250,000 German men inside the shrinking Stalingrad pocket were fighting for their lives. Almost every day, the pocket got smaller. Men were eating rats and slowly starving and freezing to death. After it was clear that the relief effort would fail, Paulus repeatedly asked Hitler for permission to surrender. Hitler refused every time. Finally, growing tired of Paulus's entreaties, Hitler promoted Paulus to the rank of field marshal, the highest rank in the German Army. The Führer knew that no German field marshal had ever surrendered. Instead, they would take their own life. That message was not lost on Paulus.

Hitler's air force chief, Hermann Göring, promised the Führer he would deliver the 300 tons of supplies needed for the men in Stalingrad daily. He never delivered more than 150 tons in one day. Most of the time, it was far less. Weather, Soviet planes, and anti-aircraft guns destroyed the rest.

Once the German planes landed, they would take out the wounded or those with "pull" in the Nazi Party. The scenes at the last German-controlled airfield when the last planes were leaving could not have been more pitiful. Guards at the doors shot into crowds of men as they attempted to force their way onto the planes. Some of the guards were pulled out of the planes and

killed. Planes were overloaded and sometimes crashed. Others had men hanging off the wings, who then tumbled to their deaths while their comrades watched. Everyone in Stalingrad knew that being a Soviet prisoner was a virtual death sentence.

On January 22nd, 1943, Paulus gave the order for his men to surrender. A pocket of “die-hards” in the northern part of the city held out until February 3rd. Even after the surrender, German broadcasts at home featured interviews with men “on the front on the Volga,” but these were recorded in Germany with combat sounds edited in. By the time most Germans heard them, Stalingrad had already been surrendered.

Ninety-one thousand Germans went into Soviet captivity. Ten years after the war ended in 1945, the last Germans in the USSR, numbering around 5,000, were sent home.

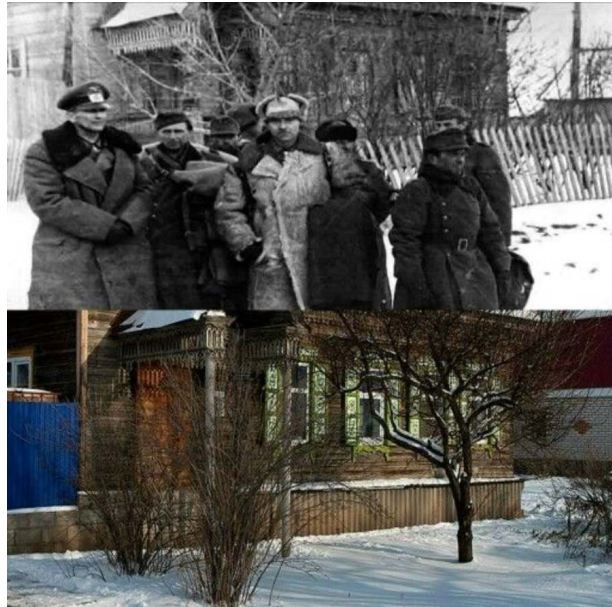


Illustration 17: Top: Paulus, on the left, and his staff upon surrender. You can see his HQ building in the background. Bottom: Picture of HQ building today.



Illustration 18: Germans surrendering at Stalingrad

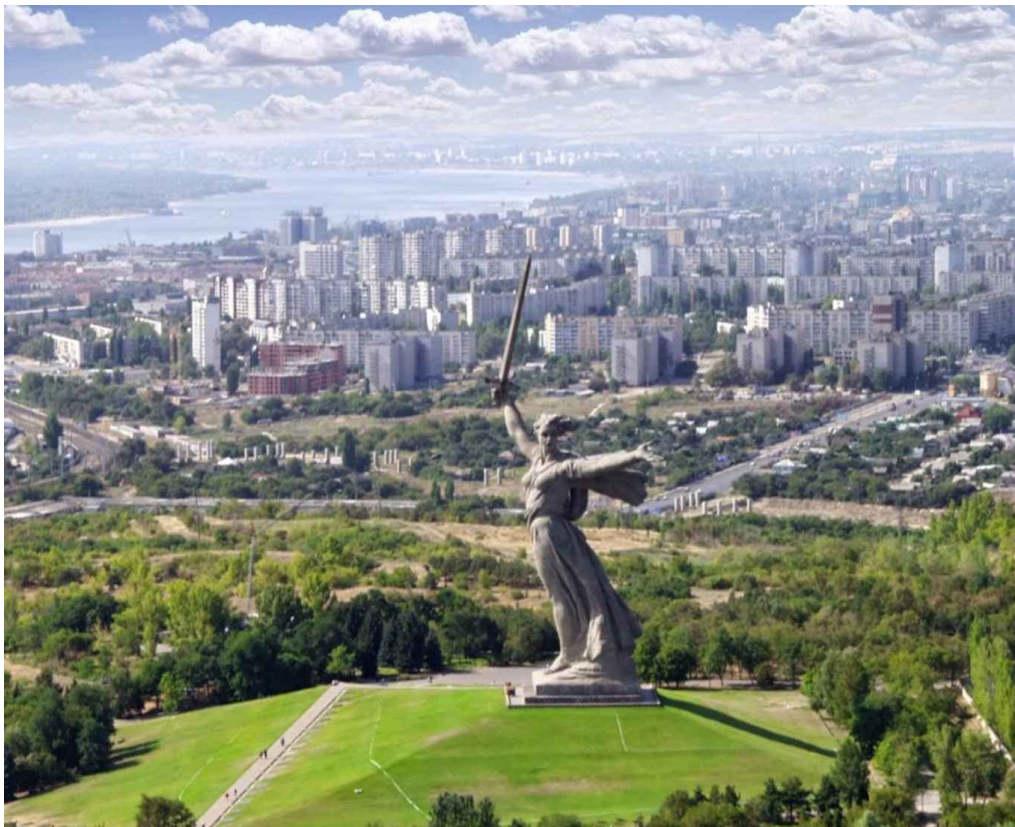


Illustration 19: “The Motherland Calls” on Mamayev Kurgan. This is one of the tallest free-standing statues in the world at 279 feet.

Conclusion

Stalingrad was the “high-water mark” of the German Army in the USSR. After Stalingrad, the war, not only in Russia but everywhere, went decidedly against Hitler. There was only one time after the battle that the Germans were able to launch a major offensive in the East. This was at Kursk in July 1943. However, this, too, was a colossal defeat.

Stalingrad changed everything. Soviet morale soared through the roof, and Soviet strength increased, though they had sustained unreal casualties. The Soviets also began to master the “new” tactics of modern mobile warfare that had been introduced by the Germans in 1939. In actuality, while the Soviets became masters at mobile warfare and surprise, the Germans, guided by Hitler’s stubborn refusal to give an inch of ground, reverted to digging in. This resulted in the Germans being isolated and cut off time and again, just as the Soviets had been in the first stages of the war.

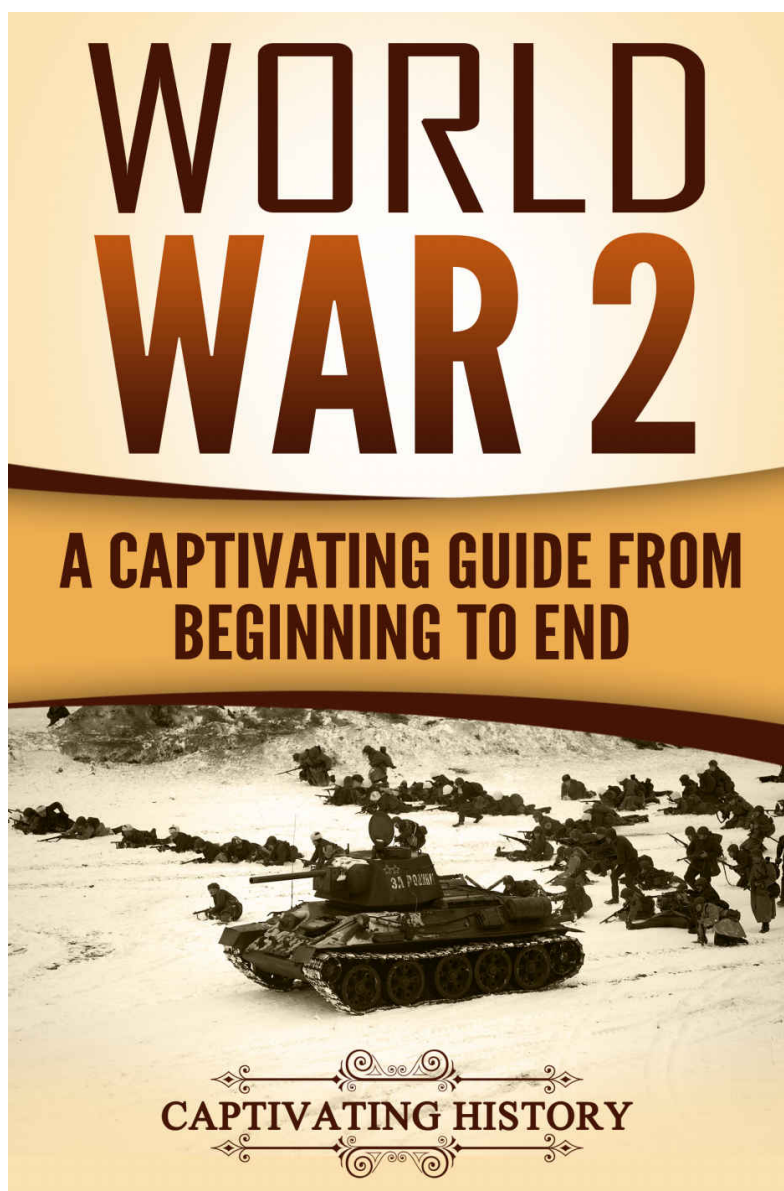
Though many in Germany needed to believe the war could still be won, most knew something terrible had happened on the Volga. This was reinforced when survivors of the battle were evacuated before the end of Operation Uranus and the last airlifts. Already becoming a recluse, Hitler retreated further and further into his fantasy land, leaving much of the war effort to his propaganda chief, Joseph Goebbels. Goebbels began making speeches around the country, urging a greater effort from the German people. The slogan he touted was “Total War, Shorter War!” By this point, even the Nazis knew the Germans were getting tired of the war effort and the millions of casualties. And it all began at Stalingrad.

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Movies/Programs about the Battle of Stalingrad, with author's recommendations:

Stalingrad: Dogs, Do You Want to Live Forever? (1959) - Drama, black and white, German language with subtitles. A bit slow but excellent.

Stalingrad (1993) - Drama, color, German language with subtitles.

Somewhat of a remake of the above film but better and more balanced.

Soviet Storm: WW2 in the East (2011) - Documentary, Russian-made but balanced with historians from both sides. Moves well for a documentary.

World at War: Stalingrad (1973) - Documentary. Still holds up after 47 years, and how can you go wrong with Laurence Olivier narrating?

Enemy at the Gates (2001) - Based on the 1974 William Craig book, the movie is a dramatic retelling of the famous "sniper battle" involving famed Soviet sniper Vasily Zaitsev. Take it with a grain of salt, and you'll enjoy it immensely.

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