The Battle of Stalingrad

The Early Triumph of the Nazi Military and the Hubris That Led to Its Fall

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Anyone familiar with World War II history can probably think of countless examples of triumph and tragedy experienced by those who fought and died in the war. But the Battle of Stalingrad is a particularly stunning example because it was German triumphs that made the country’s leader, Adolf Hitler, brazen and overconfident. At the same time, it was the Russians’ tragic suffering that helped them find the strength to triumph over Germany in the Battle of Stalingrad.¹ The German defeat at the Battle of Stalingrad was a remarkable turn of events and can be directly tied to Adolf Hitler’s hubris, which led to the downfall of the German war machine. It was this hubris, along with the doggedness of the Russian people, that gave Russia the opportunity to triumph against all odds.

The year was 1933. A man named Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany after leading the Nazi political party.² This man’s deep-set hatred toward “lesser races” and extreme pride in the German people led to the greatest war in history.³ His disdain for those he viewed as inferior was the driving force that led him to direct the German Army to invade other countries and begin the expansion of Germany.

One of Hitler’s main objectives was to expand Germany and unite the German people who had spread over Europe since the days of the German empire. This expansion began with demonstrations of force and the demand of small areas, such as the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia, but Hitler’s main goal was the Polish Corridor. This strip of land, conceded after

WWI, divided Hitler’s great country in two. The corridor was a logistical burden to the Germans, and they demanded it from the Allies.

The Allied Forces, a coalition of France, Great Britain, and Poland (later to include Russia and the USA), sent a clear message to Germany that an invasion of Poland would mean war. The Germans demanded the Polish Corridor from the Allies, but the Allies refused these demands. Germany invaded Poland. War was declared. The Germans allied with Russia and crushed Poland quickly. The Allies were surprised by this new alliance of Russia and Germany, as they thought they would have time to support Poland if Germany invaded.

After this astonishing victory, the Nazi war machine turned its attention to France. The French had been preparing for war with Germany. They had built a line of defenses along their German border, called the Maginot line, to deter the Germans from invading. France didn’t, however, extend the Maginot line to their border with Belgium, with whom they were friendly. Belgium wouldn’t let France build defenses or place troops in their country. Belgium had very few defenses and a minimal number of soldiers, while the Germans had committed 137 divisions, 2,000 tanks, and 3,800 Luftwaffe aircraft to the invasion.4

The lack of defense in Belgium was the reason the Germans invaded. The French were committed to supporting Belgium. Armed with the knowledge of Belgium's weak defenses, the French rushed in, following a plan only put into place four days beforehand.5 This left much of the Maginot line under-defended. They thought the large hills and forests would deter the German troops. The knowledge of Belgium’s lack of defense is the reason the French

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overextended, leading to a shortage in troops elsewhere. The German forces bombarded Belgium for 18 days, forcing the Belgian king to surrender unconditionally.\textsuperscript{6}

One under-defended point was the Ardennes, a very woody and hilly area on the northern border of France. It was here that the Germans forced 50 divisions through and penetrated the French line of defense.\textsuperscript{7} The French and British tried to retreat, but they were cut off by the German forces as they moved across France. The best of the French and British forces was encircled as the German armored divisions reached the Atlantic coast on May 20.\textsuperscript{8} Despite vicious counter-attacks by the French, the Allies were unable to break free, though they did sabotage many military supplies. The French and British were succeeding defensively, but a large number of Belgian forces surrendered, leaving a gaping hole in the Allied army.\textsuperscript{9} Most of France's best troops were subsequently wiped out, and the British only avoided capture because of the desperate last-minute escape at Dunkirk. This rescue was executed with the help of many brave British civilians, who miraculously crossed the extremely dangerous waters of the English Channel to bring home 198,000 of their young men, along with 140,000 French and Belgians.\textsuperscript{10}

Germany’s occupation of France took only six weeks. The Germans, now without enemies in the west, began pushing eastward towards the Volga River and Moscow, piling up victory after victory, setting the stage for the Battle of Stalingrad. These great triumphs inspired the German people and convinced their Chancellor that the Germans could not be defeated.

After the Nazi successes in Western Europe, the Germans turned on Russia on June 22, 1941. The Germans, now unhindered by the western Allies, blitzkrieged through Western Russia, bringing them up to the gates of Moscow by the end of November. Blitzkrieg was a form of warfare defined by quick strikes using motorized and armored vehicles or infantry, followed by close air support in order to break the lines of the enemy and encircle them. The poorly trained Russian troops were captured in huge numbers as Germans encircled retreating armies and cities in which the Russians were encamped. 5.7 million Russian troops were captured over the course of the war.

Most of the shocking atrocities of Hitler's reign occurred in the push eastward. Jewish people across Europe were persecuted, enslaved, and killed. The Jewish people were dragged to death camps, where they were starved, brutally beaten, put to work, and ultimately sentenced to

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death.\textsuperscript{16} Anyone who would try to stand up to their occupiers would be dragged with the rest of the Jews to death camps. The killing of Jews was considered by many Nazi leaders to be a source of entertainment. Stories began circulating of terrible acts committed against Jewish people, such as 90 Jewish children who were locked in a cellar without food or water.\textsuperscript{17} The many atrocities committed fed Hitler’s ego and the Germans’ overconfidence and made them feel unstoppable.

At this point in the war, most of Europe was under the control of Hitler and the Nazis. The quick fall of France and the lack of resistance from Russia gave the Germans a lot of confidence in their push eastward. They felt as though they could not be beaten, their tactics were impossible to counter, and there was no possibility they could lose. Hitler started to take control of the day to day operations of his army, making strategic decisions on his own without the help of his officers or strategists. This was a problem, as Hitler was usually acting on outdated information, an obvious deficiency to any army. These strategists were the same people that historians regard as the most brilliant military minds of the day, having invented and successfully executed the blitzkrieg.

Hitler’s overconfidence turned out to be a grave mistake as the German army was quickly running out of supplies.\textsuperscript{18} His men were spread thin across Eastern Front, and almost all of Hitler’s junior officers were advising him to slow down and to wait for reinforcements and supplies. The pleas for help were ignored. When one of his officers said, "there would be a


disaster.” if reinforcements were not sent, Hitler accused him of not having “national socialist ardour.” Hitler admonished him, “Clearly I cannot expect this of you (Halder).” Hitler had set his sights upon Russia and was not to be stopped from advancing.

At this point, the German Army was very poorly supplied as they advanced into Stalingrad in early fall. They expected to have another quick victory but were met by a surprising amount of resistance. This resistance was put forward by the Russian people, who were desperate to stop the march of the German Army into their territory.

The Battle of Stalingrad began, with both sides fighting ferociously. Russian troops shipped cattle and grain out of the city, to prevent them from falling into German hands. No civilians left, however, as the Russians did not want the world to think they could not defend their own cities. Civilians helped in combat, which inspired the soldiers, reminding them who they were defending. Despite all of this though, the Russians were getting pushed back further and further into the heart of the city. The Luftwaffe, German air divisions, were starting to take over the skies. The Volga River behind the Russians could no longer be used commercially due to the bombing of the Luftwaffe and the onshore fighting, which crippled the Russian economy.

The Germans captured scores of civilians and Russian troops, most being shipped off to work in concentration camps.

Stalin then issued Order 227, which told the Russian people that it was time to stop retreating. The order sentenced cowards and “panic mongers” to death and explained to the

Russian people that just because Russia is a huge country, that does not mean all its land should be fought upon. Many Russians at the time had counted on Russia endlessly retreating into their vast territory. Order 227 ends with the now famous phrase, “Not one step back!”, which became Russia’s new slogan.22

Stalingrad was now under renewed fighting, as the Russian people were inspired. The general mood around the war was shifting from one of despair and constant retreat to one of strength and moving as one to repel the Nazis and reclaim what was theirs. A restructure of the Russian forces at Stalingrad occurred, offering the men renewed hope.23

After months of fighting, Russian forces were down to fewer than 20,000 troops and were trapped on the brink of the Volga. Yet morale among the soldiers was high. It looked like a German victory was imminent, leaving them the gateway into the main Caucasus. The Caucasus are a land rich in food and oil, which the Germans needed badly. But the Russians knew reinforcements were coming and a sense of brotherhood propelled them forward. Anatoly Mereshko described their spirit this way: “When only a few hundred of a division that once had over 7,000 soldiers [remained], they would hold the ground for their dead friends.”25 The soldiers were not ready to give up on this battle, despite the odds stacked against them.

These reinforcements arrived mid-winter, gathering in the surrounding mountains and encircling the German Army in a move much resembling their own blitzkrieg. This shocked the German forces. They were so close to winning the city of Stalingrad and had not expected Russia

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23 Jones, Stalingrad: How The Red Army Triumphed, 18
25 Jones, Stalingrad: How The Red Army Triumphed, 9
to have more strength. The German forces were now surrounded, trapped in the city of Stalingrad. The Russians pelted them with artillery shells, pushed in from all sides, and fired on the German troop movements in the rough terrain of the destroyed city. This type of warfare is the one the Soviets preferred, as their extremely large population could sustain mass casualties, something the Germans could not afford. The destroyed city created an abundance of hiding places that only the Russian army knew about which gave them a huge advantage in the close-quarters of city combat, contributing further to the shift in dominance over the city.

The Axis powers of Germany, Italy, Hungary and Romania were running out of supplies. The Italians, Hungarians, and Romanians were defeated in rapid succession. Allied forces captured 100,000 Germans and most of the Italian and Romanian armies, leaving the western German flank exposed. The Russians attempted to exploit this temporary weakness, but the Germans closed in tighter leaving all flanks equally vulnerable. This put the Axis powers on the defensive, a position they had not been in the entire war. This pressure, combined with a lack of food and having been weakened by a harsh winter they were not accustomed to, made the Germans extremely weak and growing ever weaker. The Russians would soon win the Battle of Stalingrad against a starved and weakened German force.27

This change in power on the Eastern Front, the triumph of a Russian force that won against one of Hitler's very own German armies, was the most important turning point in the war. The Germans now had to pull troops from the Western Front, Africa, and the occupation of France. The start of the Allied invasion of Italy meant that both the Russians and the western

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Allied forces could move more freely, and offensive action could be taken. The great acts of D-day, the Second Battle of El Alamein, and the Battle of the Bulge were all made possible by the depleted German force and the success of the Russian army. This was exemplified by the next moves of the Russian forces, the reclamation of oil fields and grain stocks, the freeing of the Russian people in areas previously occupied by the German forces, and the advancement of the Russian forces towards Berlin.

The Battle of Stalingrad, in my opinion, was beautifully summarized in this quote by Col. Serebryakov, who served in the Russian Army during the Battle of Stalingrad. “It was a struggle for survival - and both sides learnt from each other along the way. There was one vital factor which coexisted alongside the terrible exhaustion caused by combat at close quarters: in this extreme situation, extraordinary inner resources were released within people. I witnessed a mother lifting up the entire side of a German truck to free her trapped child and saw small nurses carrying wounded paratroopers twice their size back to the trenches. Such things seemed physically impossible, but something was happening to people, both physiologically and psychologically. Some sunk under the stress of the fighting; others found something greater to draw upon. One such guiding principle was to always look out for others. We would put it like this: help your comrade first, then worry about your own survival. It was an attitude that really sustained our soldiers.”

Still, we must remember that even this would not have been enough to win the battle of Stalingrad if it wasn’t for the hubris of Hitler. It was this that gave the Russians an opportunity to fight a weakened German Army in the city named for its leader. The Russians drew upon the

tragedy that had struck them, losing their cities and facing persecution, fighting in horrendous conditions for feet of ground, and triumphing as a result of their spirit and determination. They used the tragedy they experienced to galvanize their efforts to not only survive but triumph. This triumphant message is etched not only in Russian history, but in world history as well. The tragedy they endured, in the Battle of Stalingrad, would echo for generations to come.
Starved and Weak German soldiers huddled up to stay warm under siege.
ПРИКАЗ
НАРОДНОГО КОМИССАРА ОБОРОНЫ СОЮЗА

№ 227
«28» июля 1942 г.
г. Москва

Враг бросает на фронт все новые силы не считаясь с большими для него потерями, летит вперед, рвется в глубь Советского Союза, захватывает новые районы, опустошает и разоряет наши города и села, насильствует, грабит и убивает советское население. Бон идут в районе Воронежа, на Дону, на юге у ворот Северного Кавказа. Немецкие оккупанты руются в Сталинграде, в Волге, хотят любой ценой захватить Кубань, Северный Кавказ с их нефтяными и хлебными богатствами. Враг уже захватил Ворошиловград, Сталин, Россошь, Кущины, Волокули, Новочеркасск, Ростов-на-Дону, половину Воронежа. После потери Украины, Белоруссии, Прибалтики, Донбасса и других областей у нас стало намного меньше территории. Мы потеряли более 70 миллионов населения, более 800 миллионов пудов хлеба и более 10 миллионов тонн металла в год. У нас нет уже теперь преобладания над немцами ни в людских ресурсах ни в запасах хлеба. Отступать дальше - значит загубить себя и загубить вместе с тем наш Родину. Надо в корне пресечь разговоры о том, что мы имеем возможность без конца отступать, что у нас много территории, что страна наша велика и богата, население много, хлеба всегда будет в избытке. Такие разговоры являются лживыми и вредными, они ослабляют нас и усиливают врага, ибо, если не прекратим отступление останемся без хлеба, без топлива, без металла, без сырья, без фабрик и заводов, без железных дорог. Из этого следует, что пора кончить отступление. Ни шагу назад! Таким теперь должен быть наш главный призыв! Чего же у нас не хватает? Не хватает порядка и дисциплины в ротах, батальонах, полках, дивизиях, в танковых частях, в авиакадетах. В этом теперь наш главный недостаток. Мы должны установить в нашей армии строжайший порядок и железную дисциплину, если мы хотим спасти положение и отстоять нашу Родину. Панцыры и тропы должны быть отойти на месте. Отныне железным законом дисциплины для каждого командира, красноармейца, политработника должно являться требование: «Ни шагу назад!» без приказа высшего командования.

Единственной причиной ухода с позиций может быть только смерть!

Когда в немецких войсках расшаталась дисциплина, немцы принять некоторые суровые меры, приведшие к неплохим результатам. Они сформировали более 100 рот из бойцов из дивизий батальонов из командиров, провинившихся в нарушении дисциплины. А наши войска, имеющие цель защиты своей подданной Родины не имеют такой дисциплины и терпят поражение.

ПРИКАЗЫВАЮ: Сформировать в пределах фронта от одного до трех штрафных батальонов по восемьсот человек. Сформировать в пределах армий от пяти до десяти штрафных рот до двухсот человек в каждой, чтобы дать им возможность искупить свою преступление перед Родиной.

КОМАНДИРАМ И КОМИССАРАМ ДОВЕСТИ ДО ВСЕХ ФРОНТОВ, АРМИЙ, СОЕДИНЕНИЙ, ФЛОТОВ, ДИВИЗИЙ, БАТАЛЬОНОВ, РОТ И ВЗВОДОВ!

НАРКОМ ОБОРОНЫ СССР И.СТАЛИН

Тираж 3000 экз. ГКО СССР глаш. политуправление

Photo of Josef Stalin’s Order No.227.
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