

The great patriotic war 1941 – 1945 essay sample

War



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The involvement of Russia and other states of the former Soviet Union in the Second World War is known as the "Great Patriotic War." The might of the Soviet Army succeeded in overcoming Nazi Germany's gargantuan war machine in the Soviet-German war that raged between June 1941 and May 1945. It was a particularly brutal and destructive war, unprecedented in its ferocity and lack of any moral constraint. This barbarized warfare exacted an immense death toll of 27-28 million people on the Soviet side, a majority of them being civilians. According to one estimate, each minute of this war cost 9-10 lives, each hour 587, each day 14, 000 for a total of 1, 418 days. The unleashing of the "naked power of evil" that Hitler represented resulted in untold pain and inconsolable grief for the people of Soviet Union, but it also provoked their indomitable fighting spirit that eventually led them to a great triumph.

In the summer of 1941 the Soviet Red Army was the largest in the world, but nowhere close to being the mightiest. It had significant weaknesses. Just a year or two earlier it had been humiliated by the Finnish army in the Russo-Finnish War. The chief reason for the debilitated condition of the Red Army was the ruthless purging undertaken by Stalin in late 1930s. A devastatingly large number of officers (estimated around 35, 000), many of them belonging to the top echelons, were killed. Only a handful of capable commanders such as Zhukov, Rokossovsky, Chuikov, Malinovsky and Eremenko were spared to execute the Great Patriotic War. Thus weakened, the Soviet army initially presented no effective opposition to the German onslaught in mid-1941.

The Germans considered the Red army ill-suited to modern, mechanized warfare, so much so that Hitler did not think twice about opening a major offensive in the Eastern Front while simultaneously engaged on the Western Front with England and the Allies. The Red Army was in fact very well equipped, but was reeling under the loss of most of its experienced and far-sighted leaders in the Great Purge (Zaloga & Volstad 3). Added to the continuing executions, there was paralyzing political interference. As a result of which, though it was well known that German army was headed towards Moscow, the Red Army was surprisingly unprepared. Its preparedness was indeed inexplicably but deliberately mitigated through political directives from Stalin.

The invasion order of Hitler's Directive No. 21, of 18 December 1940 decreed Operation Barbarossa, which was 'to crush Soviet Russia in a rapid campaign'. By mid-May of 1941, Germany was all set to launch a vicious attack on the Soviet soil. The growing German deployments along the western borders of the Soviet Union were apparent, yet not until June 21, just one day before the actual German invasion commenced, were the border military districts alerted (Horner & Jukes 24). At the outset of the Great Patriotic War, the Soviet military were hopelessly unprepared for the chaos and turmoil of war. The ruthless speed of the German advance struck fear and panic in the Soviet people.

The Nazi army swiftly conquered vast areas of territory, killing and capturing hundreds of thousands of troops, pillaging, plundering and massacring civilian populations. The Soviets retreated, and managed to move most of

their heavy industry away from the front line, re-establishing it in more remote areas. Smolensk and Kiev fell in September. Leningrad was under siege. Over one million people died in Leningrad due to starvation and cold. The Germans were unstoppable; by October, they seemed to have broken their adversary on the Eastern Front. The German Army marched relentlessly on the road to Moscow, blazing a trail of destruction, murder and mayhem on its path. Hitler proudly declared, "The enemy has been routed and will never regain his strength" (Gilbert 242). But Russia would not give up so easily.

As the extent and reality of the German atrocities became widely known throughout Russia, the will to resist stiffened and the "patriotic war" became in reality a 'people's war', but the cost to soldier and civilian alike was horrendous. ((Erickson & Erickson 72).

As winter set in, tenacious defense prevented the Germans from capturing Moscow. However, the Russians found a surprising ally. The Germany army was ill-equipped to withstand the freezing severity of the Russian winter and was considerably weakened. The Soviets launched their first counter-attack on December 11, 1941. However, almost a year had to pass before the tide began to turn during the second phase of the Great Patriotic War. With the 1942-43 winter struggle at Stalingrad and with the 1943 German summer offensive that was crushed at Kursk, the Soviet Union consolidated its position and stood as a formidable adversary. The Battle of Stalingrad marked the end of the German advance, and Soviet reinforcements in great numbers gradually pushed the German armies back. For two years thereafter Soviet forces pushed the German army back into Germany. The third phase

of the Great Patriotic War began as the Red army advanced towards Germany, intending to capture Berlin.

The artillery bombardment that launched “ Operation Berlin” was the mightiest that had ever been recorded. It started with an ear-shattering crack as tens of thousands of guns, mortars and rockets of all calibers opened fire simultaneously.” (Le Tissier 3)

In charge of the whole operation was Marshal Georgi Zhukov, Deputy Supreme commander of the Soviet Armed Forces. The most outstanding military hero to emerge on the Soviet side during the Second World War, he came to be known as the conqueror of Berlin. He was the one to mastermind the counter-attack at Moscow and was also chiefly responsible in winning the Battle of Stalingrad. Marshal Zhukov participated in all major battles of the Great Patriotic War.

Hitler suffered his greatest military setback of the war in the summer of 1944. Operation Bagration in Belorussia was far more destructive to Germany than the D-Day landings, and the Red army eliminated three times more German army divisions than the Allies did in Normandy. Bagration was one of the largest single operations of the Second World War. Again, Marshal Zhukov was responsible for coordinating this brilliant Belorussian offensive. From Minsk in Belarus, Zhukov and his army headed to Berlin via Warsaw, liberating Poland on the way. But it was a long way from Warsaw to Berlin, and took the Soviet Army four months to negotiate, from January to April of 1945.

Zhukov's First Belorussians carried the main advance on the Warsaw-Berlin line. Beginning with Zhukov's Operation Vistula-Oder, the main attack on Germany was divided into a number of assaults. In January 1945, Rokossovsky and Chernyakhovsky, respectively commanding the Second and Third Belorussian Fronts, began their offensive to destroy the enemy in East Prussia. Koniev's First Ukrainian Front, located on Zhukov's left, started its offensive from Zhitomir en route towards Breslau (Colvin 152).

Liberating Belarus and the Ukraine, freeing Lithuania, Poland and other Eastern European countries, taking over Vienna, the capital of Austro-Hungarian Empire, Zhukov now led the final attack on Berlin with a firm hand, commanding eight hundred-thousand men, twelve thousand cannons, three thousand six hundred tanks, and three thousand aircraft.

The offensive to capture East Germany and Berlin started on April 16 with an assault on the German front lines on the Oder and Neisse rivers. After several days of heavy fighting, the Soviet 1BF and 1UF breached the German front line. The encirclement of Berlin had been achieved by 25 April when Soviet and US troops joined on the Elbe. The future of Germany and its position in the Europe of the post-war era depended on the capture of Berlin. To Zhukov, it was going to be the final encounter between the 'enemy hordes' and his own 'heroic Soviet troops.'

The 350 square miles of Berlin proved to be an enormous challenge to Zhukov. On April 30, as the Soviet forces fought their way into the center of Berlin, and soon Zhukov's Eighth Guards Army under the command of Chuikov, the hero of Stalingrad, took the Reichstag in the heart of Berlin,

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thus marking the final victory. May 9 is celebrated as the Victory Day in Russia. The great patriotic war was not merely a war between two armies; it was a total war, involving the entire Soviet people against the evil of Nazi Germany.

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