

Reflection essay on battle of stalingrad

War



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The Battle of Stalingrad was the bloodiest battle in the Second World War and marked one of its few major turning points. It was certainly the most decisive battle in the "Great Patriotic War" or the Second World War on the Eastern front. The battle lasted from 13 September 1942 until the final German surrender on 2 February 1943. A few months earlier, the Russian Red Army seemed to be on the verge of complete defeat and Hitler's evil war machine seemed irresistible.

Though the German retreat from Moscow nine months earlier brought a much needed respite to the Russians, it did not bring any real hope. At Stalingrad, however, the tide turned dramatically. In the titanic struggle that raged on the shores of the River Volga, the German Wehrmacht faced a crushing and humiliating defeat from which it never managed to recover. To the Germans, Stalingrad was the single most catastrophic defeat ever, surpassing the annihilation of Prussian Army in the hands of Napoleon at Jena-Auerstadt in 1806.

To the Russians, it was more than their greatest battle victory ever, it represented a great symbol of hope, the triumph of Russian spirit over the most gruesome adversity that had fallen on them since the German invasion in June 1941. The War on the Eastern Front was a particularly brutal and destructive war, even by Second World War standards, 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 "
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naked power of evil" that Hitler stood for 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. That fighting spirit fully asserted itself at Stalingrad. However, more than Russian valor, the chief cause for the Russian victory at Stalin was Hitler's ineptness.

Stalin – the biggest enemy of the Red Army

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'. Hitler intended for the Soviet Union to be destroyed and replaced by a group of colonies that would function under the Third Reich (Hoyt 35). 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).

Launched on 22 June 1941, Operation Barbarossa was the largest single military operation of all time. The number of troops involved, the scale of the operations, and the cruelty of German soldiers were all of appalling proportions. 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 road to Stalingrad

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 (along with the crushed German summer offensive at Kursk in 1943), the Soviet Union would consolidate its position and stand as a formidable adversary. The Battle of Stalingrad would mark the end of the German advance, and Soviet reinforcements in great numbers would gradually push the German armies back. 3. Stalingrad in 1941: a prime objective

Stalingrad, originally known as Tsaritsyn, had been a prosperous trading town on the Volga during the 19th century. During the Russian Civil War of
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1918-21, the Reds had triumphed decisively at Tsaritsyn. Though Stalin's contribution to the Reds' success was not very significant, Stalin named the city after himself when he achieved supreme power in 1925. Subsequently, Stalin's role in the victory of 1920 was enhanced through propaganda, and soon it was Stalin was officially recognized for his crucial role in both the October Revolution of 1917 and triumph of 1927.

Thus, Stalingrad came to be strongly associated with Stalin and Russian Revolution, a fact that added an important psychological dimension in showdown between Hitler's and Stalin's forces in the battle of Stalingrad. By 1941, Stalingrad was a city of 600, 000 people. It had played an important role in Stalin's industrial drive of the 1930s and its location on the Volga ensured that it was a significant player in the Soviet war economy. Hitler had set his sight on Stalingrad because it was a valuable political, economic, communications and psychological objective.

From the Soviet perspective, Stalingrad was important not only as a major industrial center but also as the major connecting point to any operations in the Caucasus.

Hitler – the Red Army's biggest ally

The disaster for Germans at Stalingrad did not bring about immediate defeat of Germany, but, after February, 1943, few German officers genuinely believed in victory. The confidence of Hitler himself could not be shaken so easily, of course, one would think. The defeat at Stalingrad drastically widened the rupture of trust between Hitler and the army high command, which began at the battle of Moscow in December 1941.

The German defeat at Stalingrad in February 1943 was a heavy psychological blow to the Wehrmacht and to the Germany people who were accustomed to victory. It raised the first widespread doubts about Hitler's leadership and the ability of Germany to win the war. After Stalingrad, Hitler himself was rarely seen in public and his outward behavior became relatively muted. In the mid-1942 the Germany army had already seemed to be in a more subdued condition as compared to its irrepressible aggressiveness an year ago.

The new Fall Blau (Case Blue) offensive was intended to be a resumption of the stalled invasion of Russia. Despite Hitler's optimism, the 1941 Campaign — which opened along a 2, 000 kilometer front and involved 148 combat divisions — failed to shatter Russia " to its roots with one blow. "... The summer campaign of 1942, although still immense, was necessarily less ambitious. (Hayward 7) Overriding his generals, Hitler gave the offensive two separate objectives on 90-degree divergent axes — the Caucasus oilfields and the Volga crossing at Stalingrad.

Fall Blau was deeply flawed by ambiguity of strategic aim. Further, Hitler's amateurish attempts to control the deployment of his forces and his opportunistic changes of mind played an important part in compromising the campaign. For Hitler, Stalingrad had become the main objective of German effort; it was an obsession. Hitler was an amateurish strategist with an unshakeable faith in his own genius, which no facts from the real world could really affect. His campaigns were foredoomed by grand-strategic misjudgment, a prime example of which is his 'no retreat' policy in Russian from Stalingrad to Berlin.

In Hitler's view the summer offensive of 1942 should bring about a final decision in the Russian campaign with the capture of Stalingrad on the Volga and Astrakhan on the Caspian Sea, and by occupying the oilfields in the Caucasus. The outskirts of Stalingrad were reached in August 1942, with the Germany forces already weakened, but the battle stuck in street and house-to-house fighting. Hitler's front commanders did realize how much of a gamble the offensives towards Stalingrad and the Caucasus were.

They harbored fears about the strengths of the Russian reserves, and the weakness of the diverging German thrusts, dependent as they were for flank protection on the ill-equipped armies of Hungary, Italy and Romania. Most of them felt that Hitler's tendency to underestimate the Russians was becoming dangerous. His leadership displayed a total lack of any understanding of the command machinery and its function. Colonel-General von Kleist warned Hitler against using the Hungarians, Italians and Romanians as flank protectors for the 6th Army during its struggle for Stalingrad, but the Fuhrer would not listen.

The Stalingrad catastrophe – a German perspective

The battle at Stalingrad was a vicious, close-quarter, street fighting. The 6th Army, commanded by Paulus, slogged on street by street, its flank protection entrusted by Hitler to Romanian troops. Paulus's units were decimated at the rate of 20, 000 casualties a week. By the end of October, however, only one tenth of Stalingrad still held out, in the north of the city. But the balance of strength was changing. The earlier German superiority had gone. Stalingrad was the first priority for Russian reserves.

Sufficient Russian troops were sent into the city to keep the fight going on there. As more Soviet troops were sent into the city, the fighting began to be a block-by-block slogging match, moving back and forth in bloody fighting. Heavy losses for both sides characterized the street fighting. In early November, the winter came. The temperatures would soon reach thirty below zero. In the middle of that month, Hitler sent Paulus a message urging one last effort to complete the capture of Stalingrad. By mid-November the Russians were strong enough to undertake a major offensive.

They had eleven armies, several mechanized, cavalry and tank corps, 900 tanks, 1, 115 aircraft for the offensive. They were all set to destroy the German forces at Stalingrad (Hoyt 160). Generals Zhukov and Chuikov directed the defense of Stalingrad. Eremenko was also sent to command the Stalingrad front. Hitler staked more and more on Stalingrad's capture, but Chuikov's 62 Army refused to yield. On 19 November 1942, the Russian counter-strike forces under Zhukov smashed through the Romanians and on 22 November completed their encirclement of Paulus's 6th Army.

On November 23 Moscow announced triumphantly that Russian forces had a great victory in the bend of the Don, and that the Germans were now entrapped in Stalingrad. That news convulsed the world... By November 28 the iron ring around Stalingrad had closed. (Hoyt 205) This was when a new deteriorating phase opened in Hitler's relations with his generals — that of his utter refusal to face the realities of defeat, of inferior sources, and of the limits to even the German Soldier's powers of endurance and fighting skill.

Hitler saw himself as an infallible military genius and blamed the incompetence and lack of willpower of his generals, or their disloyalty to

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their fuehrer, for all the failures of the German army on its bitter path back to Berlin in the aftermath of Stalingrad. The Russian attacks fell on weakly held sectors north and south of the city, manned mainly by Romanian forces in the north and by a mixture of further Romanians and units of the 4th Panzer Army in the south. The Russian plan was simply to encircle all of the German forces in the Stalingrad area.

The Russians soon broke through the thin defenses, particularly in the north. The 6th Army at Stalingrad was in serious danger. Decisive action at that time could have saved the situation for the Germans, however. If some units were sent north and south to hold the Russians while the bulk of the 6th army withdrew from the ruins of Stalingrad, it would have been saved. The catastrophe that finally overtook German army at Stalingrad in February 1943 stemmed largely from Hitler's refusal to sanction an early break-out before the Russian ring could be consolidated.

Hitler ordered Paulus and his men to remain in Stalingrad as a forward 'fortress' until the following spring. When the Russians closed the ring on 23 November, Paulus was cut off. General von Seydlitz-Kurzbach, the most senior of the corps commanders at Stalingrad, urged Paulus to withdraw without delay before escape became impossible. But Paulus, obedient to his Fuehrer, refused to listen to him. From then on the Germans descended into catastrophe slowly. On January 8 1943 the Russians sent Paulus an ultimatum, offering the alternative of honorable surrender or complete annihilation.

Consulting Hitler, Paulus refused to surrender again. The Russians continued their attack. They advanced from west to east, pressing the Germans back

into the city. They captured half of the pocket in the first week and then again paused to demand surrender. Again, Paulus consulted Hitler and refused. As long as there was still some hope for at least part of 6th Army breaking out, von Manstein, who commanded the relief efforts, supported Hitler in insisting that Paulus must continue to resist.

By 22 January, when the Russians had captured 6th Army's only remaining airfield, Manstein supported Paulus's request for permission to surrender, which Hitler refused. By the end of the month, it was nearly all over for Germans. Only a few units held out until February 1. On the 2 February 1943, the momentous battle of Stalingrad came to an end.

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