

Stalingrad: The Hinge of History. How Hitler's Hubris Led to the Defeat of the Sixth Army

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Abstract

On 2 February 1943, the surrender of Field Marshall Friedrich Paulus to the Russians at Stalingrad was the turning point of World War II. After that, the Germans never advanced further east and, after the Battle of Kursk, were driven all the way back to Berlin.

The origin of the Battle of Stalingrad started with Hitler's decision to invade Russia—Operation Barbarossa – —even though there was no threat to the European territory he had conquered. Turned back at Moscow, Hitler decided to send a large force south to the Caucasus oilfields – —Case Blue – —with the Sixth Army commanded by Paulus.

Then followed the most terrible battle in the history of war. Deprived of their blitzkrieg tactics, the Germans were forced to fight in the ruined city where the Russians were better adapted to the conditions. The fighting was terrible and the casualties horrendous. Although the Germans took 90% of the city, they were caught unaware by Operation Uranus, which trapped their forces in a *kessel* (cauldron).

Hitler's insistence prevented Paulus from retreating, attempts to supply the army by plane failed to prevent them from starving and Manstein's attempt to break through was turned back.

When the starved, frozen force was surrendered, the Russians took 91 000 prisoners, the largest defeat in German military history.

The Battle of Stalingrad need not have occurred, and the war could have turned out differently. It was Hitler's hubris that made him determined to take the city named after his opponent. His constant interference and irrational decisions made defeat inevitable.

Stalin, driven by paranoia, was hardly different. Like Hitler, he refused to let forces make tactical retreats and issued the terrible order: 'Not one a step back!'. However, Stalin eventually listened to his generals, which ensured the eventual success of the Russian army.

The meaning and significance of the Battle of Stalingrad are assessed.

Stalingrad: The Hinge of History—How
Hitler's hubris led to the defeat of the Sixth
Army

Everything in war is very simple. But the simplest thing is difficult. Carl von Clausewitz (1832)

Beware that, when fighting monsters, you yourself do not become a monster... for when you gaze long into the abyss. The abyss gazes also into you. Friederich Nietzsche

A thousand years hence, every German will speak with awe of Stalingrad and remember that it was

there that Germany put the seal on her victory. Joseph Goebbels (1943)

It is becoming ever more apparent that the Russian colossus... has been underestimated by us.... At the start of the war we reckoned with about 200 enemy divisions. Now we have already counted 360... When a dozen have been smashed, then the Russian puts up another dozen. General Franz Halder (1941)

The object of war is not to die for your country but to make the other bastard die for his. George S. Patton (1944)

The street is no longer measured by meters but by corpses... Stalingrad is no longer a town. By day it is an enormous cloud of burning, blinding smoke; it is a vast furnace lit by the reflection of the flames. And when night arrives, one of those scorching howling bleeding nights, the dogs plunge into the Volga and swim desperately to gain the other bank. The nights of Stalingrad are a terror for them. Animals flee this hell; the hardest stones cannot bear it for long; only men endure. German Lieutenant Weiner of the 24th Panzer Division (1942)

On 2 February 1943, a gaunt German Field Marshall, his stomach churning with dysentery and his face disfigured by a tic, surrendered to the Russian forces at Stalingrad. Brought to General Shumilov's headquarters, his captors thought he was an imposter and demanded proof of his rank. On that note ended the most terrible battle in history, the turning point of World War II and history.

The German loss of the Battle of Stalingrad can be brought down to one word: hubris. As 1942 broke, Hitler was secure in his position as the greatest conqueror of Europe since Napoleon. With an empire stretching from the Pyrenees to the eastern border of Poland (and a compliant Spain to the west), a dejected but defiant Britain still recovering from Dunkirk, and America committed to isolation, no one threatened him.

Hitler, however, had not achieved the goals he had set out as early as 1924 in *Mein Kampf*: the destruction of Bolshevik Russia to provide *Lebensraum* (living space) for the German people and the elimination of the Jews for all time. With his position secure, he could not withstand the temptation to invade his giant enemy. Well aware of the risks of a two-front war, he thought Britain would have no option but to surrender once the Soviet Union was eliminated. He was dismissive of Napoleon's abortive 1812 venture into Russia. The Wehrmacht was well equipped and experienced, and morale was high from their previous victories.

On the opposing side, the keyword was paranoia, emanating from one man: Josef Stalin. Suspicious to the point of delusional, he ignored evidence and only relied on his intuition. Convinced that Hitler would not dare invade Russia for several years, he thought he knew the mind of his adversary and went to extreme lengths to avoid provoking him.

After the war, with Hitler conveniently dead, the German generals loudly declared their opposition to the invasion (as well as the bloody massacres of civilians—especially Jews—that followed in their

wake). However, there was no one to contradict them. The fact was that from Keitel and Jodl down, they supported the invasion as much as their leader. The few muted objections about the fate of Napoleon in the Russian winter were overruled.

Thus Operation Barbarossa was launched on 22 June 1941. The largest army in history—3.3 million German soldiers plus half a million allied forces—stormed across a border stretching 1400 kilometres. Within a matter of weeks, thanks to Stalin's refusal to believe the intelligence he was provided or listen to his generals, the Russians were caught unawares, hundreds of thousands of prisoners were captured (most of whom were to die of starvation and exposure) and the air force wiped out on the ground (repeated by the Israeli Air Force in 1967). Stalin appeared to have a nervous breakdown¹ but recovered his poise after several days and rallied his people for the Great Patriotic War.

The Germans soon advanced hundreds of kilometres and it seemed just a question of time before the battered Russians were defeated. 'You just have to kick in the door', said Hitler, 'and the whole rotten structure will fall over'. But problems were looming for the German forces. Their supply lines were hopelessly overstretched, the terrain was not suited to armoured vehicles and, to their surprise, they found that the Russian soldier—designated a subhuman *Untermensch*—was prepared to fight to the death to defend their country, something they had not encountered before.

Morale began to plummet, equipment broke down, fuel supplies were limited and casualties escalated. The tensions this caused between Hitler and his generals was to poison decision making for the rest of the war.

Nevertheless, the Russian forces remained disorganised, poorly led and using tactically pointless frontal wave attacks that only led to mass slaughter.² The Stavka, the Russian high command, still had much to learn, and Stalin was no help either.

The German tanks, followed by the infantry, ploughed on, and Moscow, the Soviet capital, lay ahead. For once, the generals (notably Guderian) were in unison: it should be taken before winter fell. Either the war would be won or the Russians driven far away into Asia. Behind this was a more pragmatic assessment. A conquered Moscow could be a winter base for the exhausted forces, an opportunity to rebuild before resuming combat. Hitler, initially resistant, finally agreed.

Then came General Winter, the age-old reason why it is so hard to invade Russia. The roads turned to slush (the *rasputitsa*) before everything froze solid. So confident had been the General Staff of a rapid victory that no winter uniforms were provided.¹ The soldiers were reduced to stuffing newspapers under their clothes and burning everything in sight. Engines froze solid, tanks and planes could not start, guns were unable to fire, uncovered hands stuck to metal and thousands died of frostbite. By November, the invading forces were in bad shape, but the ground hardened and the tanks could then move forward and home in on the Russian capital.

Stalin, intending to evacuate Moscow, was convinced to stay by General Zhukov, who brought up fresh Siberian troops when it became clear that the Japanese were not going to invade.² The Germans got to 30 km out of Moscow, enough for a brief enticing view of the Kremlin, before Zhukov unleashed the Cossacks. Thrown back in disarray for several hundred kilometres, the Germans reorganised and managed to dig in. The fighting continued until it petered out in February. As ever unable to contain himself, Stalin insisted on attacking along the whole front instead of following Zhukov's advice to concentrate the forces, so further gains were lost. Alan Bullock described the conditions as taking the soldiers to the limits of human endurance.³

For the first time, the German forces had been thrown back—although not defeated—setting the prelude for Stalingrad. The idea of a rapid victory over the Russians was a chimera—as it had always been. They had seemingly endless supplies of men for their forces and were pouring out tanks, planes and weapons in the eastern factories at a rate the Germans could never match. Hitler must have known that the war could not be won then but gave no indication to anyone that he had changed his plans.

In April 1942, assembling a smaller but still substantial force, Hitler now aimed at the south: the Caucasus oilfields. Without oil, he said, we cannot continue the war.⁴ Added to this was an even more ludicrous ambition: to continue on to Persia and eventually link up with Rommel in Egypt, thereby strangling British control of the Mediterranean.

Thus started *Fall Blau* (Case Blue). To lead the vaunted Sixth Army of 330 000 elite soldiers,⁵ in January 1942, Hitler appointed a favourite, General

Friedrich Paulus.³ An exceptional staff officer, he had never led a field army. A problem to emerge was the character issue; utterly intimidated by Hitler, Paulus was unable to stand up to him. The Sixth Army was to pay dearly for these failings.

Setting off at the height of summer, as they surged south, it looked as if the good days had returned. During July and August, the Germans captured 625 000 Soviet prisoners and destroyed 7000 tanks, 6000 artillery pieces and 400 aircraft.⁴ On 9 July, Hitler, again overconfident and ignoring the concerns about protecting his eastern flanks, split off the Sixth Army from the Fourth Panzer Army, sending the latter to the Caucasus oilfields of Maikop, Grozny and Baku. Paulus was to swing east to take Stalingrad, which would cut off the vital supply route of the Volga. Had Hitler not split the forces in this fashion, Stalingrad was there for the taking.⁶

Despite brave fighting and taking huge casualties, the Russian forces were steadily retreating, always denying the Germans the great Clausewitzian victory they sought.⁴ Defending even more desperately, they could not stop the Sixth Army from crossing the Volga to the north of the city of Stalingrad.

As the soldiers fell back on Stalingrad, on 28 July, Stalin issued Order 227 – 'Not a step back! (*Ne shagu nazad!*)'. Each position, each metre of Soviet territory must be stubbornly defended, to the last drop of blood. We must cling to every inch of Soviet soil and defend it to the end!'.^{5,7} The invasion was presented as a war to save historic Russia, a war of revenge against an appalling enemy. The terms 'Soviet Union' and 'Communism' were replaced by 'Russia' and 'Motherland' to emphasise the nationalism of the struggle.⁷ He also refused the evacuation of civilians from the city, stating that the army would fight harder knowing that they were defending residents of the city.

As John Erickson puts it, 'With these words, Stalin had committed himself, the Red Army and the Russians at large to one of the most terrible battles in the history of war'.³

After reaching the Volga, German confidence was not to last. The Stavka was learning from their mistakes, and Stalin, slowly but surely, was learning to trust his generals. Hitler, by contrast, became increasingly alienated from the General Staff and more obdurate in his decisions.

1 And nor would Hitler allow anyone to raise the issue on the grounds of defeatism.

2 Georgy Konstantinovich Zhukov (1896–1974) was a Soviet general, Stalin's deputy and Marshal of the Soviet Union. He was the most successful general in World War II.

3 English-writing historians seem to alternate between von Paulus and Paulus; the latter appellation is more correct and used here.

4 It was a tenet of the doctrine that the political gains of the war required a definitive victory after which peace or loss of land could be inflicted.

5 This order was not disclosed to the Russian people until 1988.

Stalingrad, essentially a narrow strip running for miles along the Volga, had a structure that made it easy to invade. It looked as if the city would fall without difficulty. The Luftwaffe was called in and, on 23 August, effectively strip-bombed the city. At least twenty thousand inhabitants were killed. However, by turning the city into a mass of rubble, they created the very situation that made it more challenging, if not impossible, to gain victory. The German army was trained for rapid mobile warfare in open territory with tanks, air and artillery all combined to attack the *Schwerpunkt*—the blitzkrieg effect. Positional urban warfare was a different beast for which they had no preparation. Penetration of tank columns was rendered ineffective by the rubble, and individual tanks were deflected into defended streets where soldiers could destroy them with PTRS-4 and PTRD-41 rifles) or even Molotov cocktails thrown under the tracks. It brought out another aspect of the Russian military. They were superb at urban fighting, especially using camouflage and deception (*maskirovka*). They also turned it into a sniper war, making it extremely difficult for opposing troops to raise their heads above a parapet. Their closeness to the lines allowed them to use loudspeakers, constantly broadcasting that a German soldier was being killed every 7 minutes in Russia and reading out letters they found on soldiers' bodies.

The Germans were determined to take the city, the soldiers believing this would mean the end of the war, with Hitler constantly pushing Paulus to take the city that bore his opponent's name.

The fighting was brutal, bloody and ceaseless, often descending to hand-to-hand combat. No quarter was given or taken. The Germans took the top of Mamayev Kurgan, allowing them to overlook most of the city. Control of the hill surged back and forward, each attempt to take it leaving behind hundreds of corpses. The carnage was horrendous. To this day, skeletal remains still turn up in the city's battered soil.

The Russians controlled the east bank of the Volga, where they continued to feed in troops and supplies by ferry. In turn, the Luftwaffe strafed the ferries, often reaching the western bank filled with blood and bodies.⁶

As the situation worsened, the South-Western Front command of Lieutenant General Andrey Yeryomenko and Commissar Nikita Khrushchev, the future Russian President, made the decision to bring in General Vasiliy Chuikov to take control. Determined, skilled and ruthless, intolerant of any weakness or

⁶ This is vividly demonstrated in the opening scenes of the movie *Enemy at the Gates*.

cowardice, he was determined to keep the city from being taken. A soldier's soldier, Chuikov did not stay in the back lines but kept his base close to the fighting, constantly in danger and having to move around. He insisted that the troops always locate themselves as close to the German lines as possible, thereby preventing the Luftwaffe strafing for fear of hitting their own troops.⁸ In addition, this would force the Germans to fight on their terms: hand-to-hand.

Stalingrad was the ultimate case of urban warfare. Each street, building, basement and roof was desperately fought over. Not for nothing did the German troops refer to it as *Rattenkrieg* ('Rat Warfare'); so much took place in the rubble or even underground. They could take the rooms in a building during the day. At night the Russians would come in by the ceiling or cellar and take them back. The next day it started all over again. Hand-to-hand combat, aided by machine guns, grenades and flame throwers, was the modus operandi. The Russian soldiers found the best weapon for close combat was a sharpened excavation spade and used them to deadly effect. The PPSH-41 submachine gun, otherwise known as the 'burp gun', was also highly effective.⁹ Cheap, easy to produce and highly effective, captured versions were used by the Germans where possible, an acknowledgement of their lethality.

The Russian air force was at last coming into its own. The Luftwaffe, short of planes, fuel and pilots, no longer had control of the sky. There were also Russian women pilots—the 'Night Witches'—flying fragile biplanes to deliver deadly bombs in the face of high danger, a number of them becoming Heroes of the Soviet Union.¹⁰

The soldiers on both sides lost all sense of any other world. Each day (and often night), they surged into combat, pumped up by amphetamines or vodka to keep going. Nevertheless, the slaughter continued unabated. It was not hell, the soldier's black humour went, it was far worse.

Paulus realised how risky the situation was and that victory could not be guaranteed. However, any reservations he expressed were dismissed by Hitler, with sycophants like Keitel and Jodl baying in unison. Added to this was the weakness of the extended flank, held mainly by Rumanians, Hungarians and Italians. Poorly trained and equipped, badly led, many troops had no idea why they were sitting in a trench on the edge of Asia.

Ferocious battles were held to take over the larger structures like the tractor and tank factory. Heroic stories arose about how tiny groups fought to their

death, holding off waves of attackers, most famously the defenders of Pavlov's House, where the defenders held out for two months.⁷

Then came winter. Although better prepared for the conditions, the Germans' supply lines were stretched to the limit. Hitler, his prestige on the line, was getting more agitated and pushed Paulus even harder. They slowly advanced in the face of ferocious opposition until they had control of 90% of the city, the defendants holding a broken line along the edge of the Volga. By 14 October, the Russians had their backs against the river with the few remaining crossings under German fire.

The slaughter never stopped, but the Russians would not give way despite massive casualties. They were unaware of how dispirited the Germans were by heavy losses, fatigue and the approach of winter. At the end of their resources, demoralised and overwhelmed, their fighting was driven by the desire to end the fighting just to save themselves, all sight of victory being lost.

Back in Moscow, Stalin turned to the Stavka. Zhukov, Vasilevsky and Voronov came up with a plan to relieve the city and trap the German forces. In almost complete secrecy, a huge force was built up east of the Volga. By now, the Russians had an abundance of tanks, weapons and supplies; their soldiers were being properly trained and maintained in good condition with food, uniforms and bathing facilities. It was a belated recognition of the deep operations doctrine promoted by Mikhail Tukhachevsky, whom Stalin had executed during the purges.¹¹

On the other side, partisan forces played a big role in disrupting the delivery of supplies to the Germans, requiring large numbers of troops to keep control.

German intelligence, never ideal during the Russian campaign, had little idea of the build-up.⁸ So when news of the growing concentration of forces was relayed to Hitler, he dismissed it out of hand. The Russians, he insisted, were on their last legs and it was just a question of time before the city fell.

On 19 November, Operation Uranus commenced when all hell broke loose, starting with a huge artillery bombardment. After which the Russian forces, led by their tanks and followed by the Cossack cavalry, struck out across the snow. It was a classic military strategy: a giant pincer movement would go round each side and unite to trap the Germans in a large

kessel (cauldron).⁹ First in line were the hapless Rumanians who were cut to pieces; the rest soon followed. On 23 November, the two pincers united at Kalach. ¹⁰ The Sixth Army was trapped.

Three days later, Chuikov's 62nd Army switched over to offence, preventing German forces from leaving the city to fight in the *kessel*.¹¹ The wheel had turned full circle.

As Paulus realised the extent of the crisis, he contacted Hitler for permission to make a tactical retreat, which was peremptorily forbidden. His forces, Hitler said, had been trapped before, and the plan was to keep them supplied until they could be relieved and freed by external units. Later, Erich von Manstein, the best German general, tried to persuade Hitler to allow the Sixth Army to retreat with no more success.

How was a large army of 310 000 men to be rescued? In Operation Winter Storm, Manstein was to break off from the Crimea and push through to Stalingrad, rescuing the surrounded forces; until then, Paulus was told not to move under any circumstances.⁶

Obsessed with never giving up an inch of conquered land, Hitler could still be manipulated by the sycophants in his court. Goering, who had been in something of disgrace after the failure in the Battle of Britain (to say nothing of his dissolute lifestyle and morphine addiction), said the Luftwaffe could provide the Sixth Army with all the supplies they needed—without any inquiries to his staff about what would be required—and promptly accepted by Hitler.

It was, in fact, a hopeless task. The army needed 300 tonnes of supplies daily to survive and keep fighting (some figures state 700 tonnes, though some estimates are closer to 500 tonnes). Even under ideal conditions, the Luftwaffe could not do that—and conditions were less than ideal. The winter conditions made flying difficult, if not impossible, on many days. The JU-53 planes had to pass through a hail of anti-aircraft fire to land at the Pitomnik and Gumrak airfields, added to which was harassment by the increasingly confident and effective Russian air force fighters.

It was a disaster. The daily supplies were often well under 10 tonnes and rarely reached more than 100. Moreover, what did arrive was often useless: boxes of pepper and condoms.

The men of the Sixth Army sat in their trenches, slowly

7 Russian propaganda exploited these events to the full, even if in reality they were not as dramatic as portrayed.

8 The Russian spy network, extending to the German high command, by contrast, kept the Stavka informed of all developments.

9 The tactics reprised Hannibal's victory at Cannae.

10 The frequently shown film of the reconnection of the forces at Kalach was, in fact, staged later.

11 Although he had guessed something was on, Chuikov was not informed until the last minute.

starving and freezing. With so little ammunition, firing had to be restricted; in any event, they were often too weak to put up more than token resistance.

At first, morale was maintained. Hitler, the soldiers believed, would not let them down. Optimism rose when Manstein's column got going; surely the great general would free them? This was not to be. Zhukov was waiting for him, his forces bogged down and it became evident he would have to retreat to avoid getting trapped. His force got to within 50 km of the *kessel*, but no closer. Manstein urged Paulus to ignore Hitler and break out to join them. Paulus, paralysed by indecision, could not bring himself to defy his leader. In addition, he doubted (probably correctly) if his forces, deprived of fuel, could get more than 15 km at the most if they did get going.¹²

The game was up, and the soldiers of the Sixth Army realised their fate was sealed. All hope that the Fuhrer would save them was lost, causing considerable bitterness. For the starving and frozen soldiers, some by now dropping dead as they stood, Christmas was a pathetic and sad event. While they sat around a single lit candle and chewed on a piece of horsemeat—if they were lucky—they had the humiliation of listening to the German radio broadcasting a fake and cheery broadcast that claimed to emanate from Stalingrad.

While Hitler remained in a state of unreality, on 8 November, he went to the annual meeting of the Gauleiters—The True Believers—to celebrate the beer hall putsch, giving a grandiloquent speech about how they had obtained victory at Stalingrad.¹¹ There were, he sententiously stated, just a few small areas holding out, but he saw no need to rush, seeing as victory was already theirs. This could not have been more wrong, but truth and Hitler never had a close relationship.⁶

In January, the Russian forces attacked the *kessel* with vigour. First, the airfields went and then the army was cut in two. The few planes that got through (weather permitting) would parachute down their loads, most of which landed in the Russian zones. Most of the German soldiers retreated into the city's bunkers and cellars, where they had been trying to blast out the Russians. On 9 November, General Rokkosovsky sent an emissary to Paulus offering surrender with good conditions¹²—as later events were to show, a dubious promise. Paulus refused. It made no difference. By the end of January, he was huddled in a cellar near the Univermag building, close to a nervous breakdown.

The end came soon. Hitler wrote off the Sixth Army, instructing Paulus that every man should fight to the death to set an example that would go down in German history. Seemingly compliant, he assured Hitler that the Sixth Army would fight to the end. Hitler, in return, made him a Field Marshall. Both were aware that no German Field Marshall had ever surrendered. The message was clear; he was to die a hero by killing himself.

Paulus—finally—turned and surrendered to the Russians. Twenty-two generals were taken with him. As a Roman Catholic, he was opposed suicide, later saying that he would not give the Bohemian corporal the satisfaction of killing himself.¹³

The Russians had no idea what they had captured, finding to their surprise that 91 000 soldiers emerged from the cellars with their hands up to be taken prisoner.⁴ It was a colossal victory, followed with excitement and joy by the Allies, leaving many Germans to realise that the war was now unwinnable and it was just a question of time before the end.³

Learning of Paulus' surrender, Hitler flew into a rage, vowing never to appoint another Field Marshal again.¹³ He ranted to his staff, asking how Paulus could surrender himself to the Bolsheviks, predicting he would throw in his lot with the Russians.⁷

In this, he was right. Bitterly disillusioned, Paulus joined the Soviet anti-Nazi group, testified at the Nuremberg trials and spent the rest of his life defending his actions at Stalingrad.¹⁴ He died in Berlin in 1957 without ever seeing his wife again.

Although he said that the loss of Stalingrad turned his stomach,³ Hitler gave no indication that he recognised his role in the disaster. Others were not so sure. Erwin Rommel said he (Hitler) seemed depressed and upset about the Stalingrad disaster.

Stalingrad was the eastern limit of the German's advance. After the loss, Hitler's empire was to steadily shrink westwards. Later that year, the Battle of Kursk was their last major offensive. It failed, and after that, it was a scorched-earth retreat all the way to Berlin.

What can be learned from the Battle of Stalingrad? With the onset of Barbarossa, the Russian people, notably the Ukrainians and Caucasians, were first not unsympathetic to the invaders, millions having died in Stalin's purges in the 1930s. The Germans could have capitalised on this, but their treatment of the civilian population, driven by fanatic racial ideology, was so much worse that it was easier to

¹² One of the best Russian generals, who even threatened Zhukov, he had been imprisoned in Stalin's purges, but was released when the Germans invaded.

¹³ He would, in fact, go on to appoint another seven field marshals during the last 2 years of the war.

support the devil they already knew.

The Battle of Stalingrad followed Clausewitzian principles.¹⁵ First, he advocated that defence is the stronger form of war for a range of reasons: longer lines of communication and logistics, lack of intimate knowledge of the local terrain and moral (psychological) problems—the defenders are fighting to protect their homes, their families and their country. Second, the offence culminates when it can no longer survive a counterattack, and the defence culminates when it can no longer conduct one—this sums up the battle and perfectly contrasts it with the battle for Moscow.

Books and film about Stalingrad continue to pour out in almost the same numbers as those about Hitler, who remains a source of enduring curiosity. They provide abundant information on the suffering of the German soldiers starving in the *kessel*. This contrasts with the absolute lack of information about the three million or so Russian prisoners who were penned up and left to die by their German captors.¹⁴ Tragically, they remain forgotten as Stalin deemed that anyone captured by the enemy (including his own son) was officially listed as a traitor and their families treated accordingly. Perhaps the Russian archives will one day allow some voices to emerge from those victims who suffered such a terrible fate.

Stalingrad was the most catastrophic military defeat in German history. The Russians paid a terrible price but won against all expectations.¹³ Estimates of the death toll vary widely, not least because of the difficulty in accessing Russian sources. The most frequently quoted figures are 2 000 000 dead: 900 000 Germans and Allies, and 1 100 000 Russians. These figures included the 13 500 soldiers killed by Beria's NKVD for alleged cowardice or treason.

Of the 91 000 German prisoners taken, only 5000 were to return to Germany in 1955. Most of them died shortly after capture from exposure and starvation. The rest vanished into the Gulag, where they were regarded as war criminals and put to work. These figures may seem horrendous but pale in comparison to the awful fate of the several million Russian prisoners.

Having paid such a terrible price, the Russian people hoped repression would improve once the war ended. This proved an illusion. Stalin took no time to clamp down again, extending the oppression to the Eastern European countries that fell into the Soviet orbit. This was to last until his death in 1953 and

¹⁴ We learn from Anthony Beevor¹³ that 600 Russian prisoners were gassed in Auschwitz on 3 September 1941, the first experiment there with Zyklon B.

was only partially alleviated by Khrushchev and his successors.

Both sides pushed propaganda to its limits. The German people were constantly told of the great victory at Stalingrad until Goebbels, more realistic than Hitler, determined to prepare them for the inevitable loss.¹⁵ For their part, the Russians turned sniper Vasily Zaitsev into a national hero who had shot the head of the German sniper school sent to dispatch him. This was a complete myth,¹⁶ added to which many of the best snipers at Stalingrad were women—known to the German as the 'Shotgun Wives'.¹⁶

After the war, there has been much criticism of Churchill's 'deal' to divide up areas of control of Eastern Europe with Stalin. However, the reality is that boots on the ground were what counted, so it would have gone ahead and may have helped to save Greece from a communist takeover.

It is more than a counter-factual exercise to reflect that the Battle of Stalingrad did not need to have occurred. Hitler's decision to invade Russia was his biggest error. Then, had he kept his forces together, they may have gotten to the oil wells before the Russians set them alight. Even then, the strategic goal of crippling the Russian war effort could have been gained when they got to the Volga. Here they could have blocked all communications and supplies to the northern centres, leaving Stalingrad to wither without support.

Stalin's interference in Russia's early war effort was almost as disastrous as that of his counterpart in Berlin. Insisting on lining the Russian forces up against the border made it easy for the invading Germans to wipe them out. His delusion of being a great war leader nearly dissipated all the gains of Zhukov's push back from the gates of Moscow. It continued the following year when he insisted that the principal German threat lay against Moscow, making it far easier for the Germans to drive down to the Caucasus.¹ However, there was a critical difference. Whereas Hitler developed a near-paranoid belief that his generals were incompetent and untrustworthy, Stalin came to accept the judgements of the high command. From Stalingrad onwards, the results showed.

Despite his stubbornness and wastefulness of soldiers, Zhukov was the most successful general

¹⁵ After the loss, an official 3 days of mourning was declared with only Bruckner's Seventh Symphony played on the radio and all restaurants closed.

¹⁶ One of whom was Zaitsev's lover, a scene reprised in *Enemy at the Gates*. Anatoly Chekhov probably matched his record.

of World War II. When it was over, Stalin feared his popularity. This saved Zhukov from execution or the Gulag; instead, he was given an insignificant provincial post, although later rehabilitated to some extent.

The Russian death toll (including civilians) in the Great Patriotic War varies from 20 to 28 million. No other country was to pay such a high price. However, as much as the British and the Americans make of their contributions in North Africa, Italy and the post-D-Day path to Berlin, the fact cannot be denied that it was the Russians who beat the Germans, and there is some justice in their getting first to Berlin. The regret is that it took a further 40 years for Eastern Europe to free themselves from the Russian clutch and finally end the most terrible war in history.

When reflecting on those times, it is important to remember how much we owe those determined defenders of the city. Stalingrad became the hinge of history when the fortunes of war swung round

irretrievably against the German forces and saved the world from total domination by a monstrous tyranny.

When it was all over, there was a wrecked and ruined city to be rebuilt. Chuikov, not known for eloquence or sentimentality, summed it up:

*Goodbye Volga. Goodbye the tortured and devastated city. Will we ever see you again and what will you be like? Goodbye, our friends, lie in peace in the land soaked with the blood of our people. We are going west and our duty is to avenge your deaths.*¹

He did not stop until he got to Berlin.

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