

75 Years Ago, the Battle of Stalingrad

From Stalingrad to Normandy

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Region: [Europe](#), [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [History](#)

To win the war planned by Hitler, Germany, a highly industrialized country but lacking colonies and therefore woefully short of strategic raw materials, had to win it fast, before Germany's stockpiles of petroleum ran out. These reserves, much of which consisted of imports from the US, had been built up in the years leading up to the outbreak of war, and they could not be adequately replenished by synthetic fuel produced at home (on the basis of coal) and/or oil supplied by friendly or neutral countries such as Romania and – after the Hitler-Stalin Pact of August 1939–the Soviet Union.

In this context, the Nazis had developed the strategy of *Blitzkrieg*, “lightning warfare”: synchronized attacks by massive numbers of tanks, airplanes, and trucks (for transporting infantry), piercing the defensive lines behind which the bulk of the enemy's forces were typically ensconced in the style of World War I, then encircling these forces, leaving them to face either annihilation or capitulation. In 1939 and 1940, this strategy worked perfectly: *Blitzkrieg* produced *Blitzsieg*, “lightning victory,” against Poland, Holland, Belgium, and – spectacularly so – against France. When, in the spring of 1941, Nazi Germany was poised to attack the Soviet Union, everyone—not only Hitler and his generals but also the army commanders in London and Washington – expected a similar scenario to unfold: the Red Army was expected to be finished off by the *Wehrmacht* within a maximum of two months. On the eve of the attack, Hitler felt supremely confident: he reportedly “fancied himself to be on the verge of the greatest triumph of his life.”

From the *Ostkrieg*, their *Blitzkrieg* in the east, Hitler and his generals expected much more than from their previous lightning campaigns. Their stockpiles of fuel and rubber had already dwindled after their gas-guzzling planes and Panzers inflicted death and destruction in Poland and Western Europe; by the spring of 1941, the remaining supplies of fuel, tires, spare parts, etc. sufficed to wage motorized war for no more than a couple of months. The shortfall could not be compensated by imports from the still neutral US, which continued to arrive, mostly via Spain, and in return for the limited supplies of Soviet oil, Germany had to deliver high-quality industrial products and state-of-the-art military technology, used by the Soviets to strengthen their defenses in preparation for a German attack that they expected sooner or later. This dilemma was to be resolved by attacking the Soviet Union, and by attacking as soon as possible, even though stubborn Britain had not yet been vanquished: the “lightning victory” that was confidently expected to materialize quickly in the east would deliver to Germany the rich oil fields of the Caucasus, where the gas-guzzling Panzers and Stukas would in future be able to fill their tanks to the brim at any time. Germany would then be a truly invincible *über-Reich*, capable of winning even long, drawn-out wars against any antagonist. This was the plan, code-named “Barbarossa,” and its implementation got underway on June 22, 1941; but things would not work out as its architects in Berlin had expected.

While the Red Army took a terrible beating at first, it had not massed its forces at the border but opted for a defense in depth; withdrawing in relatively good order, it managed to elude destruction in one or more of the kind of huge encirclement battles that Hitler and his generals had dreamed of. The Germans advanced, but increasingly slowly and at the price of great losses. By late September, they were nowhere near Moscow and still a very long way from the Caucasian oil fields that were the real object of their desire. And soon the mud, snow and cold of fall and early winter were to create new difficulties for troops that had never been expected to fight in such conditions. In the meantime, the Red Army had recuperated from the blows it had received initially, and on December 5, 1941, it launched a devastating counter-offensive in front of Moscow. The Nazi forces were thrown back and had to adopt defensive positions where they would be able to survive the winter after the Soviet attack petered out. On the evening of that fateful fifth of December, 1941, the generals of the *Wehrmacht's* high command reported to Hitler that, on account of the failure of the *Blitzkrieg-strategy*, Germany could no longer hope to win the war.



German advances

Blue: from 7 May 1942 to 18 November 1942

Flesh: to 7 July 1942

Orange: to 22 July 1942

Lavender: to 1 August 1942

Green: to 18 November 1942

The Battle of Moscow heralded the failure of the lightning-war strategy against the Soviet Union. A *Blitzsieg*, a lightning-like victory, on the eastern front, was supposed to have made a German defeat in the entire war impossible and would in all likelihood have done so. It is probably fair to say that if Nazi Germany had defeated the Soviet Union in 1941, Germany would today still be the hegemon of Europe, and possibly of the Middle East and North Africa as well; however, in front of Moscow, in December 1941, Nazi Germany suffered the defeat that made an overall German victory impossible, not only victory against the Soviet Union itself, but also victory against Great Britain and victory in the war in general.

It ought to be noted that at that point – a few days before Pearl Harbor – the United States was not yet involved in the war against Germany. In fact, the US only became involved in that war because of the Battle of Moscow. When, within a few days after receiving the bad news from Russia, Germany's *Führer* learned of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7 and the subsequent American declaration of war on Japan (but not on Germany), he himself declared war on America on December 11. His alliance with Japan did not require him to do so, as some historians claim, since the land of the rising sun was not the object but the subject of an aggression, but with this spectacular gesture of solidarity with his Japanese partners he hoped to induce them to declare war on his own mortal enemy, the Soviet Union. In this case, the Red Army would have had to fight on two fronts, which would have revived Germany's chances of winning its war in the east. But Japan did not take the bait, and Nazi Germany was thus saddled with another formidable enemy, though it would take a long time before American forces would engage in actual combat against Nazi troops.

The Battle of Moscow was definitely the turning point of World War II, but other than Hitler and his generals, hardly anyone knew that Germany was henceforth doomed to lose the war – though admittedly only in the long run. The general public certainly was not aware of this, not in Germany, not in the occupied countries, not in Britain and not in the US. It looked as if the *Wehrmacht* had suffered a temporary setback, presumably – according to Nazi propaganda – due to the unexpectedly early onset of winter; but it was still ensconced deep in Soviet territory and could be expected to resume the offensive in 1942, as indeed it would. Other than Hitler himself and his closest military associates and political cronies, there were in fact some other well-informed observers who were aware in late 1941, and in some cases even earlier, that Germany was doomed to lose the war, though for some reasons they did not divulge that information. Among them were a handful of generals of France's collaborator-regime in Vichy, the Swiss secret services, and the Vatican.

In the spring of 1942, Hitler scraped together all available forces for an offensive – code-named “Operation Blue” (*Unternehmen Blau*) – in the direction of the oil fields of the Caucasus. He had convinced himself that he still had a chance of winning the war, but certainly not “if he did not get the oil of Maikop and Grozny.” The element of surprise had been lost, however, and the Soviets still disposed of huge masses of men, oil, and other resources. The *Wehrmacht*, on the other hand, could not compensate for the huge losses it had suffered in 1941 in its “crusade” against the Soviet Union: 6,000 airplanes and more than 3,200 tanks and similar vehicles; and more than 900,000 men had been killed, wounded, or gone missing in action, amounting to almost one third of the average strength of the German armed forces. The forces available for a push toward the oil fields of the Caucasus were therefore extremely limited. Under those circumstances, it is quite remarkable that in 1942 the Germans managed to make it as far as they did. But when their

offensive inevitably petered out, in September of that year, their weakly held lines were stretched along many hundreds of kilometres, presenting a perfect target for a Soviet counterattack. This is the context in which an entire German army was bottled up, and ultimately destroyed, in Stalingrad, in a titanic battle that started in the fall of 1942 and ended in early February 1943, precisely 75 years ago. After this sensational victory of the Red Army, the ineluctability of German defeat in World War II was obvious for all to see; and this – combined with the unprecedented losses suffered by both sides – is what has caused many historians to proclaim this battle as the turning point of the war.



Soviets preparing to ward off a German assault in Stalingrad's suburbs (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

In any event, the impact of the Battle of Stalingrad was enormous. In Germany, the public was henceforth painfully aware that their country was heading towards an ignominious defeat, and countless people who had previously supported the Nazi regime now turned against it. Many if not most of the military and civilian leaders who were involved in the attempt on Hitler's life in July 1944, for example, lionized today as heroes and martyrs of the German "anti-Nazi resistance," such as Stauffenberg and Goerdeler, may have been brave individuals, but they had enthusiastically supported Hitler at the time of his triumphs, that is, before Stalingrad. If, after Stalingrad, they wanted to get rid of Hitler, it was because they feared that he would drag them with him into ruin. Awareness of the significance of the German defeat on the banks of the Volga similarly demoralized the allies of Nazi Germany and caused them to start looking for ways to exit the war. In France and in other occupied countries, countless leading collaborators started to discreetly distance themselves from the Germans. Conversely, news of Stalingrad boosted the morale of Germany's enemies everywhere. After many long years of darkness, when it had seemed that Nazi Germany would dominate all of Europe forever, resistance fighters in France and elsewhere finally perceived the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel, and arms were taken up by many who had been too lethargic before they received the happy tidings from Stalingrad. In France, in particular, the name of Stalingrad became a battle cry of the resistance.

After the victory of the Red Army in Stalingrad, then, Nazi Germany and its allies were confronted with the inevitability of defeat, while France and all other countries occupied by Nazi Germany could look forward to their liberation. But the prospect of Germany being defeated and of France and the rest of Europe being liberated by the Red Army caused alarm bells to ring in the halls of power in London and Washington. The American and British leaders had been happy to remain on the sidelines while the Nazis and Soviets were locked in mortal combat on the Eastern Front. With the Red Army providing the cannon fodder needed to vanquish Germany, the Western Allies minimized their losses and built up their strength so that they would be able to intervene decisively at the right moment, when the Nazi enemy and the unloved Soviet ally would both be exhausted. With Great Britain at its side, the USA would then be able to play the leading role in the camp of the victors and dictate the terms of the peace to the Soviets as well as the Germans. It is for that reason that, in 1942, Washington and London refused to open a “second front” by landing troops in France; instead, they opted for a “southern strategy,” sending an army to North Africa to occupy the French colonies therein November of that same year. (Some of the aforementioned Vichy generals were in North Africa at the time and used the opportunity to defect from the Pétainregime, which they knew to be doomed, and to join general de Gaulle’s Free French Forces.)

Because of the outcome of the Battle of Stalingrad, the situation changed dramatically. From a purely military perspective, Stalingrad was of course a boon to the Western Allies, because this defeat had impaired the Nazi enemy’s war machine to their advantage as well. But Roosevelt and Churchill were far from happy with the fact that the Red Army was slowly but relentlessly grinding its way towards Berlin and possibly even farther westward, and that the Soviet Union – and its socialist social-economic system – now enjoyed enormous popularity among patriots in all the occupied countries. (Conversely, the “Anglo-Saxons” were far from popular in countries such as France, partly because of their meagre contribution in the fight against Nazism, and partly because their air raids on cities in France and other occupied countries caused considerable civilian casualties; it was also unhelpful that Washington had long maintained diplomatic relations with the collaborator government of Marshal Pétain in Vichy and was known to be “recycling” Pétainists in North Africa.) It now “became imperative for American and English strategy to land troops in France, liberate Western Europe, and drive into Germany to keep most of that country out of [Soviet] hands” as two American historians, Peter N. Carroll and David W. Noble, have written. It was too late to plan such a complex operation for 1943, so things had to wait until the spring of 1944.

Image on the right is from [Benoît Prieur / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 4.0](#).



The landings in Normandy in June 1944 did not constitute the turning point of World War II. Militarily, Nazi Germany had already received decisive blows at the Battles of Moscow and Stalingrad, and again, in the summer of 1943, at the Battle of Kursk. And while the landings officially purported to liberate France and the rest of Europe, their “latent,” that is, unspoken but real function was to prevent the Soviet Union from singlehandedly liberating Europe, possibly including Western Europe all the way to the English Channel- a prospect that was first raised by the Red Army’s victory on the banks of the Volga. Liberating France - or *occupying* it, much as the Germans had occupied the country, as General de Gaulle described the outcome of the Normandy landings on one occasion!- also purported to prevent French resistance leaders, of whom the majority had great sympathy and admiration for the Soviets, from playing a major role in the reconstruction of their country; it was feared, for example, that these patriots might proceed to implement the radical social-economic reforms proposed in the “Charter of the [French] Resistance,” including nationalization of corporations and banks that had collaborated with the Nazis. (Dire warnings to that effect were emanating regularly from the leading American spy based in Switzerland, Allen Dulles, later to become head of the CIA.) To prevent such a scenario, which conflicted with their own plans to make room for unbridled capitalism in postwar France and Europe in general, the Americans would have to rely on a popular but conservative leader of the French resistance, Charles de Gaulle.

They actually detested him, but eventually did arrange for him to come to power, orchestrating his much-publicized triumphant stroll down the Champs Elysées at the time of the liberation of Paris. De Gaulle would prove notoriously difficult to deal with, and he would have to allow the radical elements of the resistance some input into government policy. But without him the much more far-reaching reforms of the Charter of the Resistance might have been implemented, and it is extremely unlikely that the US would have been able to integrate France into the anti-Soviet alliance it set up in Europe in the context of the Cold War.

Of that brief moment in French history, when many if not most of the denizens of the country were still aware that their country’s liberation was due mostly to the efforts and sacrifices of the Soviet Union, and, in stark contrast to the present situation, harboured enormous goodwill vis-à-vis the Russians and other Soviet peoples, visitors to Paris are still reminded today by the name, dating back to July 1945, of one of the city’s biggest squares: *Place de la Bataille-de-Stalingrad*, “Square of the Battle of Stalingrad.”

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