

The Battle of Stalingrad 1942-1943: Historical Context and Importance

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A war against the Soviet Union was wanted by the industrialists, bankers, large landowners and other members of Germany's upper class, the "elite" of the land. That was one of the reasons, and arguably the paramount reason, why they had enabled the coming to power of Hitler, a politician of whom it was widely known that he considered the destruction of the Soviet Union as the great task entrusted to him by providence. Hitler's so-called "seizure of power" (Machtergreifung) was in reality a "transfer of power," and this transfer was orchestrated, logically enough, by those who, behind the democratic façade of Weimer Germany, ensconced in the army, judiciary, state bureaucracy, diplomacy, and so forth, wielded power, namely the upper class. However, to win the great 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 the depletion of the stockpiles of imported rubber and above all petroleum that Germany could establish before the start of the conflict. These reserves, much of which consisted of imports from the US, could not be adequately replenished by synthetic fuel and rubber 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.

It is in this context that 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, supposedly a great military power. 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 would be finished off by the Wehrmacht within a maximum of two months. Hitler and

his generals despised the Soviet Union as a ‘giant with feet of clay’, whose army, presumably “decapitated” by Stalin’s purges during the thirties, was nothing more than “a joke,” as the Führer himself put it on one occasion. 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.”

Image: German infantry and a supporting StuG III assault gun during the battle (Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 de)



From the *Ostkrieg*, their *Blitzkrieg* in the east, on what would later be called the “eastern front,” 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 had embarked on a conquest of Europe from Poland to France via Norway; 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 Soviet Union as part of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact of August 1939, as is claimed by some historians. According to a meticulous study by the Canadian history professor Brock Millman, published in the *The Journal of Contemporary History*, merely four percent of Germany’s fuel came from Soviet sources. In 1940 and 1941, Germany depended mostly on petroleum imported from two countries : first, Romania, initially a neutral country but an ally of Nazi Germany as of November 1940; second, the United States, whose “oil barons” supplied the Hitler regime with enormous quantities of “liquid gold” via neutral countries such as Franco’s Spain and occupied France; these exports were to continue until the United States entered the war in December 1941. As for the relatively modest imports of Soviet petroleum, they actually troubled Hitler deeply because according to the terms of the 1939 Pact, 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.

Hitler believed this dilemma could 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. It is this “defense in depth” that prevented the Wehrmacht from destroying the Red Army, as Marshal Zhukov has emphasized in his memoirs. The Germans advanced, but increasingly slowly and at the price of great losses. By late September, that is, two months after the start of Barbarossa, when victory should have been a fait accompli and the German soldiers ought to have been heading home to be welcomed there as conquering heroes, they were still a very long way from Moscow and even farther from the Caucasian oil fields, a major object of Hitler’s desires in his *Ostkrieg*. 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. With great difficulty, they would manage to arrest the Red Army’s offensive and survive the winter of 1941-1942. In any event, 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.

The Battle of Moscow heralded the failure of the lightning-war strategy against the Soviet Union. From a *Blitzsieg*, a “lightning-like victory,” on the eastern front, in 1941, Nazi Germany’s political and military authorities had expected that it would have made a German defeat in the entire war impossible, and that would almost certainly have been the case. 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. In other words, December 5, 1941, was the real turning point of the Second World War. 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.

Image: German infantry in position for an attack. (Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 de)



Shortly after Germany's Führer received the bad news from Russia, he learned that the Japanese had attacked Pearly Harbor on December 7 and that the Americans had reacted with a declaration of war against Japan, but not against Germany, which had nothing to do with this attack. However, Hitler himself declared war on the United States, namely on December 11. His alliance with Japan did not require him to do so, as some historians have claimed, because it required to come to the aid of a partner that was attacked by a third country; however, the land of the rising sun was not attacked but had itself initiated the hostilities. With this dramatic gesture of solidarity vis-a-vis his Japanese partner, Hitler undoubtedly hoped that would cause Tokyo to reciprocate and declare war on his own mortal enemy, the Soviet Union. In this case, the Red Army would have to fight a war on two fronts, and this might have revived Germans prospects for victory in the titanic *Ostkrieg*. 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. The general public certainly was not aware of this, not in Germany, not in the occupied countries, not in Britain and certainly 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 continued to occupy a huge part of the country. It was therefore expected that the Germans would resume the offensive in 1942, as indeed they would.

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 petroleum 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” in 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 and, as it turned out, insufficient to achieve the offensive's objective. 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 eighty 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. It is for this reason – but also because of the long duration of the battle, the huge numbers of troops involved, and the unprecedented losses suffered by both sides – that most historians consider this battle, rather than the Battle of Moscow, as the turning point of the worldwide conflict of 1939-1945.

It must be recognized that, from a strictly military point of view, the Battle of Moscow of September 1941 had already ensured that the bulk of the German armed forces would be tied down on the eastern front, with a length of approximately 4,000 kilometers, and that it was there that the Germans would have to use the bulk of their what remained of their meager resources in petroleum and rubber. This situation had eliminated the possibility of any new German military initiatives against the British and made it impossible to supply Rommel in North Africa with sufficient men, equipment, and fuel to prevent his defeat at El Alamein in the fall of 1942. However, it is obvious that the fiasco at Stalingrad made the lamentable military situation of the Reich infinitely worse and made it impossible to station a sufficient number of troops on the Atlantic coast of Europe to deal with an Anglo-American invasion that was certain to materialize sooner or later. In June 1944, at the time of the landings in Normandy, the Western Allies experienced considerable difficulties, even though they only confronted a small fraction of the Wehrmacht, while the once fearsome Luftwaffe was virtually absent from the skies over the beaches because of a debilitating shortage of fuel. Without the successes of the Red Army, first in front of Moscow and then around Stalingrad, the entire Wehrmacht would have been available to fight on the western front, and the Luftwaffe would have disposed of inexhaustible quantities of Caucasian petroleum. An Anglo-American landing in Normandy would have been “mission impossible.”

Image: Soviet soldiers running through trenches in the ruins of Stalingrad (Licensed under the Public Domain)



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 the defeat at Stalingrad. If, after the Battle of 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. As for the neutral countries, many of which had hitherto sympathized with Nazi Germany, mostly because their rulers shared Hitler's anti-Sovietism, they became considerably more benevolent towards the members of the "anti-Hitler coalition," and above all towards the "Anglo-Americans." Franco, for example, pretended not to notice the allied airmen whose planes had been shot down over occupied countries and who, assisted by resistance fighters, crossed the Pyrenees from France into Spain to return that way to England.

In France and in other occupied countries, the leading political, military, but also economic collaborators, that is, bankers and industrialists, started to discreetly distance themselves from the Germans. Relying on the benevolent services of the Vatican and the Franco regime, they sought contact with the Americans and the British, from whom they received sympathy and assistance as both sides were eager to preserve the established capitalist social-economic order. (The French historian Annie Lacroix-Riz has focused on this little-known aspect of the war in a couple of her thoroughly researched and documented books.)

Conversely, the news from 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 their ranks were now increasingly reinforced 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 great victory of the Red Army on the banks of the Volga, the specter of an inevitable defeat haunted Germany, while in the occupied countries everybody knew that the hour of liberation approached – slowly, perhaps, but surely.

Let us now consider the post-Stalingrad situation from the viewpoint of Uncle Sam and his British (junior) partner. There is no doubt about it: 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 Western Allies had been happy to remain on the sidelines, minimizing their losses and maximizing their military strength, while the Nazis and Soviets were locked in mortal combat on the Eastern Front. While the Red Army provided the cannon fodder needed to vanquish Germany, they would be able to intervene decisively, like a *deus ex machina*, whenever the Nazi enemy as well as the unloved Soviet ally would be exhausted. With Britain on its side as a junior partner, 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 this reason that, in 1942, Washington and London had refused to open a "second front" by landing troops in France. Instead, they had implemented a "southern" strategy by sending an army to North Africa in November 1942 to occupy the French colonies located there.

Image: Soviets defend a position. (Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 de)



Because of the outcome of the Battle of Stalingrad, the situation had changed dramatically. Of course, from a purely military perspective, Stalingrad proved to be 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 now 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 and encouraged the resistance movements in France and elsewhere to make plans to introduce far-reaching, virtually revolutionary changes after the liberation of their countries. Conversely, the "Anglo-Saxons" were far from popular in countries such as France, partly because of their hitherto 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 look unfavourably on the plans for radical changes after liberation. In view of all this, it "became imperative for American and English strategy to land troops in France," as two American historians, Peter N. Carroll and David W. Noble, have written and thus to prevent Western Europe and most of Germany to fall "in Soviet hands" or at least under Soviet influence. However, when the news of the Soviet triumph at Stalingrad became known and its implications started to sink in, which was in early 1943, it was too late to plan a landing in France for that same year, so things had to wait until the spring of 1944.

The landings in Normandy in June 1944 did not constitute the turning point of World War II. Militarily, Nazi Germany had already received fatal 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 the leaders of the French resistance leaders, of whom the majority had great sympathy and admiration for the Soviets, as did the rank-and-file, from playing a major role in the reconstruction of their country. Washington and London detested this "philosovietism," which was actually shared at the time by the majority of the French population. But it was feared, above all, that these patriots might come to power and proceed to implement radical social-economic reforms, 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 sabotage the radical projects of the Resistance, which were incompatible with the American plans for France and all of Europe, namely the introduction of a capitalism as unbridled as possible, Washington and London decided, after much hesitation, to rely on General Charles de Gaulle, a rare bird in the sense that he was a popular resistance leader who was conservative. The Americans considered him to be an annoying megalomaniac, but eventually realized his usefulness and made it possible for him to come to power in liberated France. That strategy involved orchestrating a kind of triumphant entry into Paris for de Gaulle, featuring a rather theatrical stroll down the Champs Élysées, during which other, arguably equally or even more important resistance leaders were forced to follow behind him. Even so, working with de Gaulle would prove to be far from easy for the Americans. It proved impossible, for example, to prevent him, once he had been anointed as head of the government, from adopting some radical reforms wanted by the resistance and by a majority of the French people. Without him, however, the Left might have come to power and many more far-reaching, quasi-revolutionary changes might have been introduced. And in that case the Americans would not have been able to integrate France in the anti-Soviet alliance they were to set up in Europe after the defeat of Nazi Germany and in the context of the Cold War. In fact, membership in this so-called alliance equated vassalage to Uncle Sam, and the alliance's objective proved to be the same as that of Operation Barbarossa, namely, the destruction of the Soviet Union.

As the Second World War came to an end, and for quite a few years afterwards, most denizens of Western European countries victimized by Nazi Germany, but France in particular, were keenly aware that the libération of their homeland was above all due to the efforts and sacrifices of the Soviet Union, a fact that had become evident at the time of the Red Army's glorious victory in the Battle of Stalingrad. It was a period of time when these same people, in stark contrast to the present situation, harboured enormous gratitude and goodwill vis-à-vis the Russians and other ethnic groups – Ukrainians, Georgians, Armenians, Azeris, Uzbeks, etc. – of the Soviet Union. The name given in June 1945 to one of the largest squares in Paris still recalls that distant and brief moment in time: Place de la Bataille-de-Stalingrad, 'Square of the Battle of Stalingrad'.

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