

# History of World War II: Overview of the Nazi-Soviet War in Early 1942, Eighty Years Ago

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*By the beginning of 1942 Adolf Hitler had led Nazi Germany into a desperate situation, from which there was probably no escape. At the time, this was not easily apparent to the Wehrmacht or the German population, nor indeed to the Third Reich’s enemies, particularly those in the West.*

The failure of Nazi Germany’s Army Groups to deliver a lethal blow against Soviet Russia in 1941, meant that the Wehrmacht had missed its chance to win the war; and well prior to the defeat at Stalingrad, which confirmed to the world that the Germans were unlikely to emerge victorious. As 1942 began, the sands of time were moving rapidly against the Nazis and their Axis allies, principally Benito Mussolini’s Italy and Ion Antonescu’s Romania, both of whom were dependent on German success to ensure their own survival.

The Soviet Union of Joseph Stalin, with its greater industrial power and much larger population than the Reich, could only strengthen as the conflict continued and the Germans could only weaken. However, the USSR itself would never completely recover from the devastation inflicted by the Wehrmacht on their state, at a minimum 25 million Soviet deaths suffered and tens of thousands of towns destroyed (1); along with the effort simply expended in the struggle against the German war machine.

English historian Chris Bellamy wrote that the Nazi-Soviet War had ongoing implications, not merely for Germany but for Russia too, and was a leading factor which “ultimately broke the Soviet Union” in 1991. The other central cause behind the USSR’s disintegration was “the succeeding struggle against the West – which followed without any respite”. (2)

Bellamy recognised that Soviet Russia “was a long-term casualty of the Great Patriotic War [1941–45]” (3). Had Hitler known this as he raised a pistol to his head in the Führerbunker, and furthermore that the Soviet Union would collapse without a shot fired, he presumably would have gone to his grave in a more serene state of mind. Russian military journals conceded that the Soviet victory over the Germans was achieved at too great a cost. (4)

During the Nazi-Soviet War, the turning of the tide took far longer than Stalin and his regime

had expected. From January 1942 until the high summer, the Soviet hierarchy continued to claim complete triumph was achievable over the Wehrmacht that year (5). The Germans proved to be made of sterner material than Napoleon's army, in their ill-fated 1812 attack on Russia.

The lingering effects of Stalin's purges of the Red Army high command (1937-41) should not be underestimated. After the war, Marshal Georgy Zhukov said the purges had inflicted "enormous damage" on "the top echelons of the army command" (6). As Zhukov knew, the repercussions were felt strongly in the war with Nazi Germany. The Red Army had a shortage of top class commanders. It was further deprived of the initiative to make independent decisions when needed, especially early in the conflict against Nazism when Stalin was personally caught by surprise with the German invasion.

Moreover, British scholar Evan Mawdsley observed, "the purges made foreign governments – potential allies as well as potential enemies – assume that the Red Army was a broken shell" (7). The British and French presumed it to be so. As did Hitler's Germany who had taken advantage of the circumstances.

Red Army intelligence agent Leopold Trepper wrote in his memoirs,

"The Germans exploited this situation to the full, instructing their Intelligence Services to convey to Paris and London the alarming facts – and they really were alarming – on the state of the Red Army after the purges". (8)

It was the case also that the purges were a factor which influenced Hitler to attack the USSR, on 22 June 1941, otherwise he may have held off until 1942 or later. Proof of the damage imparted on the Soviet armed forces was evident in the Winter War with Finland (30 November 1939–13 March 1940), which the Soviet authorities had predicted would last for between 10 to 12 days. (9)

The Nazis were subsequently confident that a war against Soviet Russia would be a routine one. This confidence grew after the German divisions brushed aside French and British forces, during the summer 1940 Battle of France.

With 1942 continuing from its opening weeks the German high command, on paper at least, still had cause for hope. Most of eastern Europe and European Russia was under Nazi occupation, and there was no immediate threat of a large-scale Anglo-American landing in the West. Though by some distance the world's strongest country, America and its war industry was shifting slowly into gear after the Great Depression, and would not reach its potential until late in the global conflict.

Much to Stalin's dismay and frustration, it was the Japanese, and not the Germans, who would then endure the brunt of US industrial might. Stalin and his entourage's growing suspicions, that the Anglo-American powers hoped the Nazi-Soviet War would last for years, were based on well-founded concerns.

This desire had already been expressed in part by Harry S. Truman, future US president, hours after the Wehrmacht had invaded the Soviet Union.

Truman, then a US Senator, said he wanted to see the Soviets and Germans "kill as many as possible" between themselves, an attitude which the New York Times later called "a firm policy" (10). The Times had previously published Truman's remarks on 24 June 1941, and as

a result his views would most likely not have escaped the Soviets' attention.

The area of landmass conquered by Nazi Germany increased substantially again through 1942. Expanding to its peak, the Third Reich's territory was equal to the size of terrain conquered by the legendary Macedonian king, Alexander the Great, in the 4th century BC (11). Alexander the Great had ruled over a land area from the eastern Mediterranean all the way to north-western India. Hitler's dominion stretched across the entirety of continental Europe, much of north Africa and had breached into the fringes of western Asia.

As early as 18 October 1941, the Germans had taken captive at least 3 million Soviet troops. Bellamy noted,

"The total of 3 million was almost 10 times the figure of 378,000 admitted by Stalin on 6 November [1941], on the eve of the twenty-fourth anniversary of the 1917 October revolution. By the end of 1941, 3.8 million Soviet servicemen and women had surrendered or been captured". (12)

Stalin was not assuming responsibility for the fall of Kiev, in the middle of September 1941, which had resulted in 665,000 Soviet soldiers taken prisoner by the Germans, an unequalled number in the military annals. By refusing to allow the Ukrainian capital to be abandoned for strategic reasons, Stalin had overruled the pleas of commanders like Zhukov and Semyon Budyonny. The latter was a distinguished cavalryman, but this did not prevent Budyonny from being scapegoated for the Kiev calamity and sacked on 13 September 1941.

Geoffrey Roberts, a specialist in Soviet history, wrote that

"Stalin fully shared these misconceptions and, as Supreme Commander, bore ultimate responsibility for their disastrous practical consequences. As A.J.P. Taylor noted [a British historian], Stalin's dedication to the doctrine of the offensive 'brought upon the Soviet armies greater catastrophes than any other armies have ever known'. There were many occasions, too, when it was Stalin's personal insistence on the policy of no retreat, and of counterattack at all costs, that resulted in heavy Soviet losses". (13)

Among Hitler's goals for the 1942 offensive was to deal a devastating blow on the Red Army, by destroying its divisions in the south-western USSR; and thereafter seizing control of the Soviet oil fields of the Caucasus, primarily at Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan. The fossil fuel sources there supplied the Soviet Union with almost 90% of its fuel, a remarkable total. Roberts outlined,

"Unlike in 1941, Hitler did not necessarily expect to win the war in the east in 1942" (14). He did expect to place the Reich in an insurmountable position, self-sufficient by enjoying mastery over rich oil deposits and, in doing so, depriving Soviet Russia of those reserves.

Should they fail Hitler acknowledged, "If we do not capture the oil supplies of the Caucasus by the autumn, then I shall have to face the fact that we cannot win this war" (15). German plans for the 1942 summer campaign expounded that the Russian infiltrations, behind Wehrmacht lines, were to be wiped out once and for all. The surrounded German garrisons in the Russian towns of Demyansk and Kholm were to be relieved, and the Soviet pocket at Volkhov, 70 miles east of Leningrad, was earmarked for eradication. (16)

German objectives further stated that the 60 mile Soviet salient near the city of Izyum, in eastern Ukraine, should be cleared of Russian forces; as would the Kerch peninsula in the east of Crimea, while the city of Sevastopol in southern Crimea was to be taken.

The German Army of 1942 was still very powerful, and it remained much stronger than its Soviet counterpart. Between January and June 1942, the Germans would inflict 1.4 million casualties on the Soviet Army, while in those same 6 months the Wehrmacht lost 188,000 men, Mawdsley highlighted (17). The Germans therefore had less than one-seventh (13.4%) of Soviet personnel losses during the first half of 1942.

The German high command had contemplated remaining on the defensive through 1942, so as to build up its strength to something like that of 1941. The primary argument against this once more loomed large, in that the Germans could not afford to let the war drag on indefinitely, and had no alternative but to revert to attack.

The maximum Russian goal in the Winter Campaign was to encircle and annihilate German Army Group Centre, the largest and strongest Wehrmacht force. Were this achieved, the war would have been practically decided in the Russians' favour in 1942, but it was not to be. By late January 1942 it was clear the operation had failed, largely because of robust counterstrokes launched by the German 9th Army commander, Walter Model, known as Hitler's "fireman" (18). The less ambitious but realistic Russian aim, supported by Zhukov, of forcing the enemy back to the city of Smolensk, 230 miles west of Moscow, also fell short of being reached.

At the beginning of February 1942, the Eastern front was stabilising, and the threat of a capitulation akin to that suffered by Napoleon had disappeared. The German high command achieved this in part by removing tired commanders when necessary, and replacing them with energetic and skilful officers (19). Perhaps most notably General Model and Field Marshal Günther von Kluge, the new commander of Army Group Centre, who had replaced the disgruntled Fedor von Bock on 19 December 1941. Mawdsley described the 59-year-old von Kluge as "one of Hitler's most talented and effective leaders". (20)

In the second week of February 1942, Field Marshal von Kluge issued a positive report about Army Group Centre's fighting capacity. This account was accurate and warmly received by Hitler and the military staff at the Wolf's Lair headquarters. The Germans had altogether lost 48,000 men in January 1942, hardly a shattering number (21). In mid-February 1942, Hitler informed his commanders that the "danger of a panic in the 1812 sense" was "eliminated". (22)

Most senior German officers agreed with Hitler's wish to instigate another offensive for 1942 but, as the year before, they favoured a major drive through the centre - in order to finally capture Moscow, the heartbeat of Soviet Russia, which had narrowly eluded the invaders at the start of December 1941. The centre of Moscow was just 100 miles from the most advanced German positions (23). If the capital went uncaptured, the Soviet Union would remain in the war beyond 1942. The taking of Stalingrad would not have changed that.

Hitler had recklessly postponed Army Group Centre's march on Moscow in August 1941, instead dispatching separate panzer formations northward and southward towards Leningrad and Kiev. Undeterred, he intended reverting to this plan for 1942, of holding in the middle and attacking on the flanks; but Hitler accepted (for the time being) that he would have to be less grandiose than in 1941, because his armies were now not as large.

The Nazi leader temporarily put to one side capturing Leningrad by storm, so the city would continue to be strangled and bombarded.

In March 1942, after nine months of fighting, the Germans had suffered 1.1 million casualties, a fraction of Soviet losses, but still serious (24). Of the German casualties, by 20 February 1942 about 10% of them (112,627) comprised of frostbite victims (25). This was not surprising in the midst of one of the worst Russian winters ever recorded.

German losses were insufficiently replenished during the winter fighting, with Army Group Centre receiving a modest 9 fresh divisions. Hitler could not restrain himself, however, and he was encouraged by General Erwin Rommel's victories in North Africa: such as the recapturing in late January 1942 of Benghazi, Libya's second largest city on the Mediterranean coast.

Before long, Hitler was dreaming not only of advancing through the Caucasus, but of linking up with Rommel's panzers in North Africa - and then advancing to the oil rich Middle East nations of Iran and Iraq, while another thrust was to be implemented along the Caspian Sea in the direction of Afghanistan and India. (26)

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## Notes

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