

History of World War II: The Soviet Red Army's Winter Campaign 80 Years Ago

Part II

By [Shane Quinn](#)

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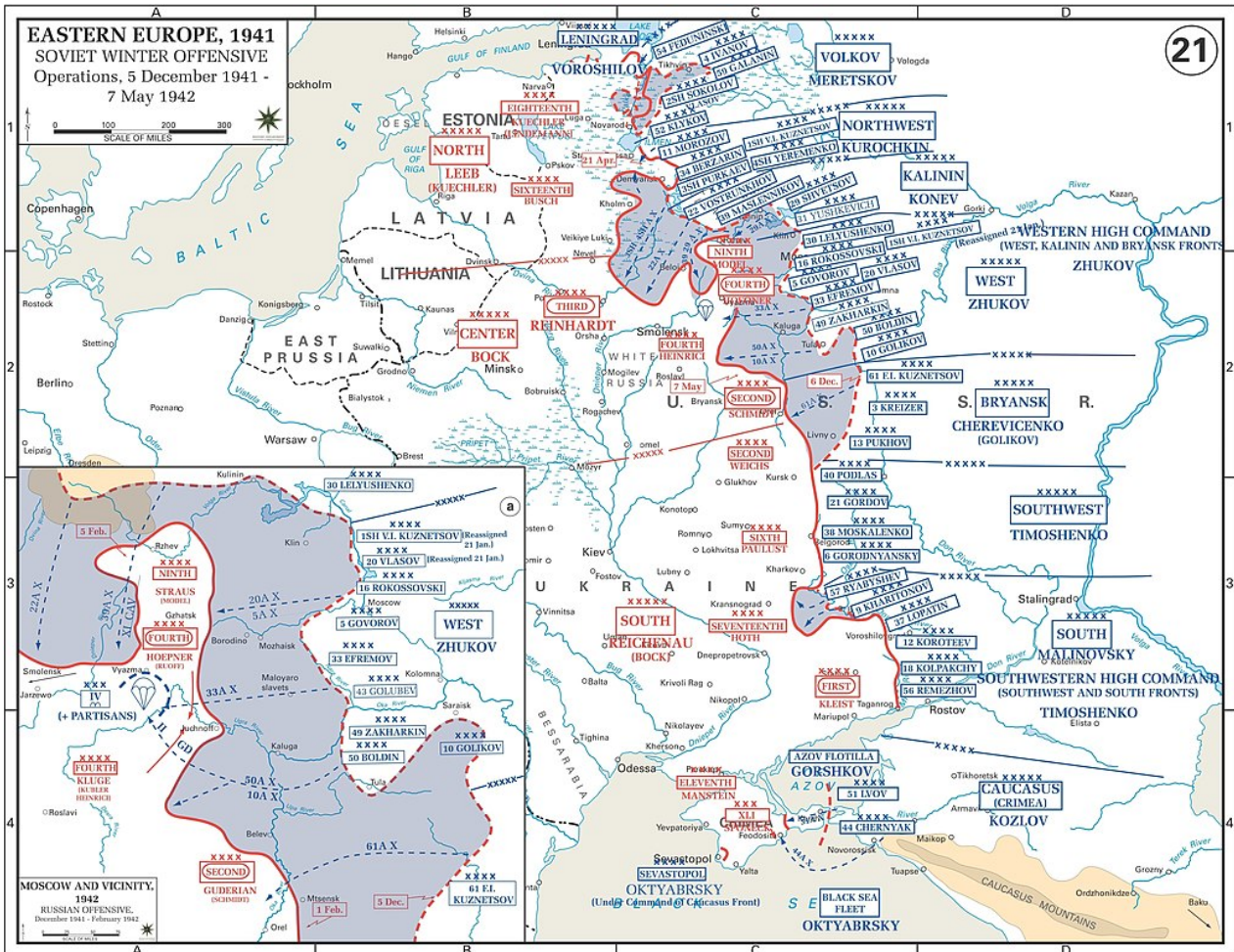
Six weeks into the Soviet Army’s counteroffensive, on 15 January 1942 Adolf Hitler at last agreed that German Army Group Centre could make a gradual, fighting withdrawal to a straighter and shorter line slightly further west of Moscow.

The Nazi hierarchy hoped that this would fortify the Wehrmacht’s defensive position, and enable them to fend off continued Soviet counterattacks; in order to reconstitute German forces for another major offensive in the summer of 1942.

Hitler attributed the failure of his 1941 campaign to destroy the USSR as largely due to “a surprisingly early outbreak of a severe winter in the East” (1). He did not mention the crucial errors himself and the high command made regarding grand strategy, and neither did he give the Soviets credit for putting up a stronger showing than the Nazis had anticipated.

Nevertheless, the Russian winter of 1941-42 was far colder and longer than normal, and indeed was “one of the most severe winters on record”, as noted in a paper co-authored by prominent climatologists (Jehuda Neumann and Hermann Flohn) with the Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society. (2)

A table produced in this study reveals that the temperature around Moscow, for the month of November 1941, was on average a remarkable 6.8 degrees Celsius colder when compared to November 1940 (3). For December 1941, the temperature in Moscow was 5.2 degrees Celsius lower than 12 months before; and in January 1942, it was 6 degrees colder than January 1941. Even the month of March 1942 was appreciably colder than March 1941, showing a 3.6 degree lower temperature on average, with the thermometer still well under zero.



Map of the Soviet 1941–1942 winter counteroffensive. (Source: Public Domain)

These much colder than typical temperatures are similarly reflected in recordings posted at Leningrad, Soviet Russia's second largest city (4). However, the appalling weather was not the principal reason behind Operation Barbarossa's derailing. The Germans were pressed for time, and had been unable to reach their goals, mainly because of the strategic blunders committed by the German high command; such as stretching their forces over too broad a front on 22 June 1941, and two months later when Hitler on his own initiative delayed the advance on Moscow. The Blitzkrieg had slowed in large part because of this.

Military author Donald J. Goodspeed wrote,

“The German high command had attempted too many things at the same time. It had neglected the primary axiom of the single objective [taking Moscow]”. (5)

Considering by late 1941 the Germans were deep inside the western Soviet Union, that they had not been given sufficient warm clothing, were experiencing problems with logistics and supplies, and had received barely any new fighting divisions, their performance that winter was quite incredible. In total during the three months of January to March 1942, the Wehrmacht inflicted 620,000 casualties on the Red Army, according to British scholar Evan Mawdsley; the Germans in that same period lost 136,000 men, equating to 22% of Soviet personnel losses. (6)

It was the ongoing German ability, to exact heavy casualties on the Soviets, which ensured that Hitler and his military command remained confident they would emerge victorious from the war, particularly as the winter progressed and the Wehrmacht's position solidified.

Goodspeed stated,

“It is impossible to withhold admiration from the German achievement in that terrible winter, an achievement much more significant than all the previous German victories. It is impossible to withhold admiration, but it is infinitely sad that men should have been called on to fight so well for so bad a cause”. (7)

On 29 January 1942 General Georgy Zhukov, the Soviets’ top commander, complained that he had so far lost 276,000 soldiers in the winter fighting, and received a mere 100,000 reinforcements (8). In his memoirs, Zhukov unceremoniously labelled the Russian counteroffensive “a Pyrrhic victory”; he criticised how the counterattack is often regarded as a Soviet triumph, calling it an “embellishment of history” and “a sad attempt to paint over failure” (9). The above casualty figures support the arguments of Zhukov.

While Zhukov’s lamentations on not being granted enough replacements also seems justified, in the three months from December 1941 the Soviet Army was bolstered with 117 new divisions, a very high number (10). The leading enemy force, German Army Group Centre, received only 9 fresh divisions from December 1941 to March 1942.

Hitler was relieved to observe that the Germans’ slow retirement of mid-January 1942 was successfully implemented. In the process, the Wehrmacht did suffer considerable losses in men and matériel. By 31 January 1942, total German casualties on the Eastern front came to 918,000, amounting to 28.7% of the original German invasion force of June 1941. (11)

In comparison, the Soviet Army at the end of 1941 had suffered almost five million casualties (12); that is the vast majority of the Red Army’s personnel strength of mid-1941. The halting of the German advance had, meanwhile, breathed new life into anti-fascist guerrilla activities, especially those in Yugoslavia and Greece. The Resistance forces helped to tie down a few German divisions. The Wehrmacht had no such difficulties from the Western European nations under Nazi rule. The French, for example, sent a contingent to fight alongside the Germans against Soviet Russia. (13)

In an unforeseen twist of events, the positive outcome of Hitler’s steadfast directive of mid-December 1941 – in which he had ordered German commanders to deploy dynamite and other explosives to blast gaping holes in the frozen ground (14), to be used as defensive strongholds called “hedgehogs” – coupled with the successful action of 15 January 1942, appears to have augmented Hitler’s status as the German Army’s Supreme Commander.

Mawdsley acknowledged,

“Hitler came out better from these winter battles than Stalin did, at least within his own short-range terms. The ‘standfast’ policy saved his Eastern front. Ironically, the disaster at Moscow probably enhanced in the short term his reputation (and his self-estimation), as a war leader, although in a different way from the 1940 campaign in France. He could claim to have saved the German Army from its own errors”. (15)

On 19 December 1941 Hitler appointed himself Supreme Commander, replacing Field Marshal Walther von Brauchitsch. The latter had resigned due to heart trouble and the deteriorating circumstances in the East. Hitler insisted that,

“Anyone can issue a few tactical orders. The task of a Commander-in-Chief is to educate the army in the spirit of National Socialism. I don’t know any general in the army who

could do this as I want it done". (16)

Hitler's self-assignment as Nazi Germany's warlord was not at all bad news for the Russians. Having limited military experience, Hitler was bound to commit errors in the time ahead. In reality, the Nazi leader had been de facto Supreme Commander for months before December 1941.



On 10 January 1942, Joseph Stalin informed his generals in a directive that he expected "the complete defeat of the Nazi forces in 1942" (17). The Red Army's May Day slogan expounded, "In 1942 we will achieve the decisive defeat of the German-fascist forces". The Soviet leadership continued to state this aim was achievable "until at least late June 1942", Mawdsley wrote (18); despite the fact by then, the Germans were hundreds of miles deeper in Russian territory than Napoleon's Grand Armée had been in 1812.

As opposed to Hitler, however, Stalin possessed an extensive background in top military echelons, which would stand him in good stead as the war continued. English historian Geoffrey Roberts realised,

"Stalin was no general but he did have experience of high command in the field, and of serving in the combat zone, although not on the front line. During the Russian civil war he served as a political commissar, a representative of the communist party's central committee, responsible for securing and maintaining supplies for the Red Army, a job that involved him in high-level military decision-making". (19)

In January 1942, the Kremlin sought to inflict a fatal blow on the Nazis by executing a gigantic pincers movement, around the Russian towns of Rzhev and Vyazma. Such a move, had it been successful, would have led to the encirclement and destruction of the largest German force, Army Group Centre. Were the Soviets to achieve this, the war would have been virtually over (20). Partly because of the Russian plan, Hitler had reluctantly ordered his step-by-step withdrawal on 15 January.

The Soviets had already recaptured the Russian city of Kalinin (Tver) on 16 December 1941, 100 miles north-west of Moscow, followed by the strongpoint of Kaluga on 26 December, a similar distance south-west of Moscow. With Kalinin and Kaluga back in Soviet hands, Stalin and the Supreme high command (Stavka) now carried out their enveloping manoeuvre further west, focusing on Rzhev and Vyazma. These towns lie just over 130 miles west of Moscow.

Army Group Centre was not destined to be surrounded and destroyed. In bitter fighting the Germans held on to Rzhev. Their formidable commander, Walter Model, launched sustained and vigorous assaults against oncoming Soviet troops. Mawdsley wrote,

"General Walter Model was appointed to take over the 9th Army on the northern face of the German position... An officer of extraordinary abilities, Model began a meteoric rise, and would establish himself as the German Army's best defensive specialist, Hitler's

'fireman'." (21)

Hitler repeatedly described Model as "the saviour of the Eastern front". For his successful action at Rzhev, the Führer personally awarded Model the Knights' Cross with Oak Leaves on 1 February 1942, and promoted him to Colonel-General (22). Model, trusted furthermore by Hitler because of his pro-Nazi stance, was the only commander who could persuade Hitler to sanction retreats, sweetened with a "Shield and Sword" policy.

Through this stratagem Model would suggest a withdrawal to Hitler, with the general then stressing that it be followed by a bold counterstroke, in which the lost territory would swiftly be recaptured, or so they hoped. German military staffs were frequently amazed, to witness how Model's Shield and Sword policy promptly convinced Hitler to authorise temporary retreats (23). Other generals risked being sacked for proposing as much.

Towards mid-January 1942, the Soviet 29th and 39th armies bypassed Rzhev, and advanced south-westwards in the direction of Vyazma. Further south again, General Zhukov's divisions approached Vyazma. Despite these threats, Vyazma remained under Nazi occupation, and the Soviet 29th and 39th armies were cut off behind German lines, as General Model closed the Rzhev gap (24). The Russian advance was halted and the pincers never closed.

A Russian attempt to overcome the German 9th Army was stopped in front of Vitebsk, in north-eastern Belarus. South of Leningrad, a Soviet offensive along the Volkhov river failed to reach its objectives, and resulted in the annihilation of the Soviet 2nd Assault Army (25). On 8 February 1942, six German divisions were surrounded by the Russians at the urban locality of Demyansk, 235 miles north-west of Moscow (26). The encircled Germans fought on, and their survival was made possible by Luftwaffe supplies of food and medicine dispatched from the air.

At the Russian town of Kholm, about 200 miles south of Leningrad, a mix of German Army and police units were surrounded in late January 1942, as the Soviet 33rd and 391st rifle divisions tightened the ring around Kholm (the Kholm Pocket). Over this town the besieged Germans were likewise reinforced with Luftwaffe aerial drops. They clung on to Kholm in spite of repeated Soviet assaults, heavy casualties and a sudden upsurge of exanthematic typhus, a lethal bacterial disease. (27)

The success of the Luftwaffe manoeuvres, at Demyansk and Kholm, may have assured Hitler the following winter that it would be possible to safeguard the German 6th Army trapped at Stalingrad (28). Certainly, the Demyansk and Kholm operations lent credence to the Nazi air chief Hermann Göring, who was heartened by the Luftwaffe showing here. Later, Göring was optimistic the same undertaking would be possible at Stalingrad, until the 6th Army could be relieved.

It did not prove so, for the German airfields were further away from Stalingrad than at Demyansk and Kholm. The 6th Army was also multiple times larger, and more mouths would need to be fed to sustain it.

Outbreaks of typhus in late winter, as had afflicted the Germans in the Kholm Pocket, was expected. Such occurrences were predicted accurately by Hitler's ally, the Romanian autocrat Marshal Ion Antonescu, who said on 13 November 1941, "In my experience exanthematic typhus breaks out in February. We must organize ourselves by then. We must limit the area of the disease, send bath and delousing trains, because otherwise we will

have a wide-scale epidemic in February... The disaster will come in February, when a person is weakened by the winter, because he has not fed himself properly". (29)

In the south-western USSR, on 31 December 1941 the Soviet 302nd Mountain Rifle Division, led by Colonel Mikhail K. Zubkov, liberated the city of Kerch in eastern Crimea. Over four months later, Kerch would be taken by the Germans again on 14 May 1942. In the Crimea's far south, General Erich von Manstein's German 11th Army had "occupied the shore of the Black Sea" and the Germans enjoyed "access to the wheat granaries of the Ukraine", Leopold Trepper wrote, a top level anti-Nazi intelligence agent. (30)

Manstein's forces were still stuck outside Sevastopol, the Crimea's biggest city, which resisted heroically. Sevastopol would not fall to the invaders until the high summer (31). The most promising Russian operation took place near Kharkov, the USSR's fourth largest city, which had been captured by the German 6th Army on 24 October 1941.

In the middle of January 1942, the Soviets launched twin attacks around Kharkov (32). The Germans managed to halt the northern Soviet arm at Belgorod, 45 miles north of Kharkov; but the Russians manufactured a deep wedge in the German lines near Izyum, about 70 miles south-east of Kharkov. Only after extended fighting was the Wehrmacht able to restore the situation, and prevent the Red Army from advancing southward on Kharkov, possibly retaking the city.

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Shane Quinn is a Journalist and renowned Historian, focussing on geopolitics and the history of World War II, based in Ireland.

He is a Research Associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG)

Notes

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*Featured image: German soldiers tend to a wounded comrade near Moscow, November–December 1941
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