

History of World War II: The D-Day Landing, The Red Army's "Operation Bagration", Summer of 1944

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President Trump's controversial visit to the UK finished with his departure to Normandy to mark the 75th anniversary of the D-Day landings. Trump gathered with other Western leaders for the usual photo op which did not include the leaders of Russia and China who were not even invited even though their countries lost 27 million and 20 million dead respectively during World War Two.

In his speech [Trump](#) celebrated the sacrifice and heroism of Allied soldiers who helped liberate France from Nazi control. He thanked America's western allies stating 'our bond is unbreakable'. There was no mention of America's Soviet ally in the east. The Soviet Union made gigantic sacrifices and the decisive contribution towards defeating the German Wehrmacht during the summer of 1944.

Trump's failure to even acknowledge the role of the Soviet Union fits in with the Western narrative that the D-Day landings played the critical role in bringing about the defeat of Nazi Germany whilst completely ignoring the role of the Soviet Red Army.

Competing narratives regarding the importance of D-Day

This narrative is exemplified in the article by [Ian Carter](#) from the Imperial War Museum in London, *Why D-Day Was So Important To Allied Victory*. Carter makes the grandiose and historically inaccurate claim that the Allied invasion of Normandy played a vitally important role in the defeat of Nazi Germany:

"The German Army suffered a catastrophe greater than that of Stalingrad, the defeat in North Africa or even the massive Soviet summer offensive of 1944."

American historian Peter Kuznick, professor of history at American University and co-author, with Oliver Stone, of *The Untold History Of The United States*, has recently commented on the narrative that it was the D-Day landings that broke the back of German fascism. In an interview with The Real News Network on 9 June [Kuznick](#) commented:

"For the Americans, the war begins at Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941. And then there's some battling in North Africa and the underbelly, and Italy. But the real war for the Americans begins June 6, 1944, with the invasion of Normandy with D-Day. Then the Americans single-handedly defeat the Germans and marched straight into Berlin. And the Americans win the war in Europe. That's a very, very unfortunate and dangerous myth that has been perpetrated. And if you listen to Trump's words, again, in England, again he's reinforcing that myth about the Americans leading the way to the liberation of Europe. That's

not the reality. The reality was the success at Normandy is largely due to the fact that the Germans were already weakened badly by that point, because they had been taking a pummeling, and they were in retreat across Europe ahead of the Russian Army, ahead of the vast Red Army, which was then liberating the concentration camps.”

In complete contrast to this pro-American narrative Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, [Maria Zakharova](#), made the following statement on the 75 anniversary of the D-Day landings:

“As historians note, the Normandy landing did not have a decisive impact on the outcome of World War II and the Great Patriotic War. It had already been pre-determined as a result of the Red Army’s victories, mainly at Stalingrad (in late 1942) and Kursk (in mid-1943),”

Before I proceed here’s my disclaimer. My grandfather fought in North Africa and Italy with the British 8th Army so this article is not knocking the contribution of allied soldiers but merely seeks to give historical balance to the highly politicized narrative over who dealt the decisive blow to Nazi Germany during 1944.

Importance of German defeats during 1943

The United States entered World War Two on 7 December 1941 following the Japanese attack upon the American naval base at Pearl Harbour. As early as June 1942 the Soviet Union had urged its American and British allies to open a second front in Western Europe. It would take the US and UK another two years to finally launch the invasion of France. Meanwhile, the Red Army took the brunt of German military might and millions died in the genocidal race war waged by the Nazis on the Eastern Front.

By June 1944 the eventual defeat of Nazi Germany had already been established by the Red Army victories at Stalingrad (August 1942-February 1943) and Kursk (July-August 1943) during 1943. At Stalingrad it had lost the Sixth Army and four allied armies of over 400,000 men. Meanwhile, at Kursk it had lost 30 divisions (over 500,000 men) including 7 Panzer divisions equipped with the new Panther and Tiger tanks, 1,500 tanks, 3,000 guns and 3,500 warplanes.

Both German and Soviet generals writing after the war agree upon the catastrophic consequences of the Wehrmacht’s defeats during 1943. Colonel General Heinz Guderian, who became Chief of the General Staff in 1944, admitted that by the end of 1943 the Wehrmacht, “had suffered a decisive defeat. ... From now on the enemy was in undisputed possession of the initiative.”



Troops of the 49th Army during the capture of Mogilev on 28 June 1944 (CC BY 4.0)

Field Marshall Manstein echoed Guderian's assessment of the catastrophic consequences of German defeats during 1943. In his memoirs he noted that by the end of 1943 the Wehrmacht:

“ ... found itself waging a defensive struggle which could not be anything more than a system of improvisations and stopgaps....To maintain ourselves in the field, and in doing so wear down the enemy's offensive capabilities to the utmost, became the whole essence of the struggle.”

Marshal Zhukov, deputy commander of the Red Army later observed the decisive nature of the defeats inflicted upon the German Wehrmacht during 1943:

“Not only were the picked and most powerful groupings of the Germans destroyed here, but the faith of the German Army and the German people in the Nazi leadership and Germany's ability to withstand the growing might of the Soviet Union was irrevocably shattered.”

The American historians David Glantz and Jonathan House, in their account of the Eastern Front ***When Titans Clashed How The Red Army Stopped Hitler***, declare that 1943 was a ruinous and fatally destructive period for the German army:

“Organizationally, the Wehrmacht was clearly in decline by late 1943. In addition to the death of Sixth Army and several allied armies, the German Panzer force and air transport force had been shattered repeatedly. Hundreds of ordinary infantry divisions were reduced to two thirds of their strength, with declining mobility and inadequate anti-tank defences.”

“Indeed, after Kursk a vicious cycle set in. Each new setback forced the

Germans to commit their newly recruited replacement troops and their refurbished panzer units to battle more rapidly and with less training. Poorly trained troops suffered abnormally high casualties before they learned the harsh realities of combat. These casualties in turn, meant that commanders had to call on the next wave of replacements at an even earlier stage in their training.”

By the summer of 1944 the German Wehrmacht was incapable of conducting a general offensive on a wide front. It was reeling from the massive losses inflicted by the Red Army’s winter campaign of 1943-44 that had led to the destruction of large portions of First Panzer, Sixth, Eighth and Seventeenth Armies. 16 German divisions comprising over 50,000 men had been completely destroyed while 60 other divisions had been reduced to fragments of their former strength.

Objectives for the Soviet summer offensives of 1944

Wider geo-political considerations entered the deliberations of the Red Army command when working out the objectives for its summer campaign of 1944. The long delayed second front invasion of France was a factor in Stalin’s thinking. He was aware that the American led force landing in Normandy would be in a race with the Red Army to get to Berlin first. In 1943 Stalin met with Churchill and Roosevelt at the Tehran Conference to begin planning the post war future of Europe which envisaged the division of Germany into zones of influence. Stalin was determined that the Red Army would get to Berlin first and so have the initiative when dividing up Germany and ensuring that Eastern Europe would become a satellite buffer zone for the Soviet Union.

In March 1944 the State Defence Committee led by Stalin and the Red Army General Staff began their analysis of their options for the summer offensive. It was eventually resolved that the Red Army would attack and destroy its toughest foe: Army Group Centre which was concentrated in Belorussia. The liberation of Belorussia would place the Red Army in Poland and leave it poised along the most direct route to Berlin and have the added bonus of leaving Army Group North cut off from its supply lines and unable to retreat.

The summer campaign would involve five different offensives running north to south that would be staggered along the 2,000 mile front. Operation Bagration was named after the Russian general who was mortally wounded in 1812 at the battle of Borodino. It was scheduled to start on 22 June nearly a fortnight after the offensive against Finland which was designed to drive this German ally out of the war.

The Red Army pulled off a massive redeployment of troops in strict secrecy that was part of its highly successful deception that led the German High Command to expect the main offensives to be directed against Army Group South and Army Group North.

By mid June the Red Army had pulled off the herculean task of manoeuvring 14 combined-arms armies in to place together with 1 tank army, 118 rifle divisions, 4 air armies and 2 cavalry corps. This huge force comprised 1,254,300 men, 2,715 tanks, 24,363 artillery pieces supported by 2,306 Katyusha rocket launchers and 5,327 combat aircraft supported by 700 bombers of the Long Range Bomber Force.

The logistics involved in preparing the four army fronts involved in Operation Bagration gives an idea of the massive scale of the impending attack. The four army fronts were supported by 70,000 lorries and 90-100 trains a day bringing fuel and ammunitions up to

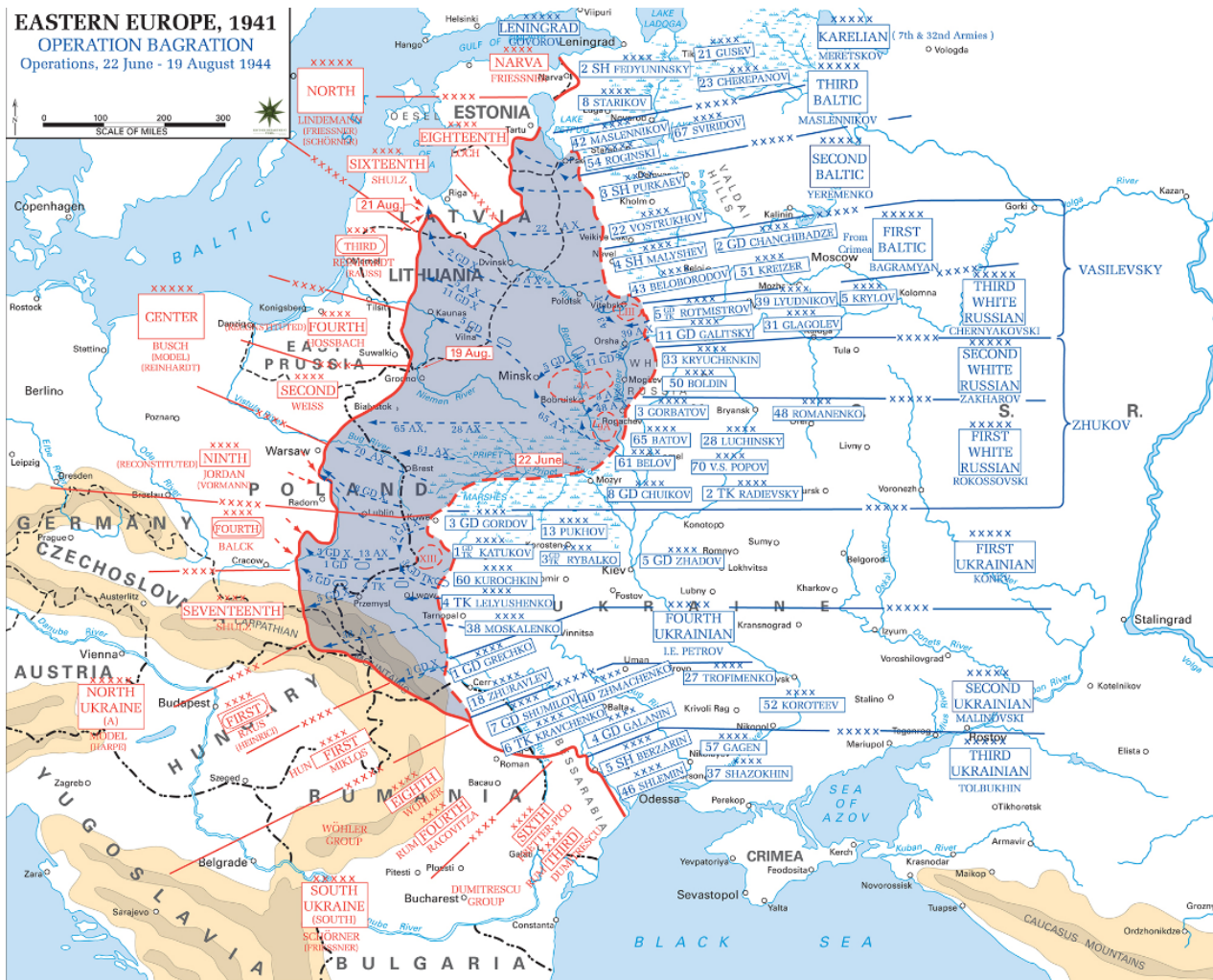
the starting lines of the impending offensive.

Summer Offensives begin

Three days after the D-Day landings on 9 June almost 1,000 combat aircraft opened the offensive that was to knock Finland out of the war. It also had the added benefit of keeping Army Group Centre distracted away from the main Soviet thrust that was carefully forming in front of the German defences.

Operation Bagration 23 June - 19 August 1944

On 19 June Soviet partisans set off over 10,000 demolition charges ripping up German rail track, rolling stock, sidings and junctions on the central front. Over the next 4 nights 40,000 demolitions spread destruction deep into the rear of the German transport network.



Source: WW11 Database

Finally, on 23 June, on almost the third anniversary of the Wehrmacht's invasion of the Soviet Union, the Red Army launched its massive surprise attack against Army Group Centre.

Operation Bagration achieved complete tactical surprise and soon had Army Group Centre reeling. The German High Command seemed completely unaware of the impending catastrophe that was rapidly enveloping their forces. Hitler, refused permission for any kind of flexible defence that involved tactical retreats by German units and was unwilling to

sanction any major reinforcements being despatched to Army Group Centre.

As early as 24 June Army Group Centre was facing a very serious threat to its entire position. John Erickson in his magisterial account of the Eastern Front, *The Road To Berlin: Stalin's War With Germany Vol.2*, has commented:

“From this point forward, Army Group Centre was caught in an impossible situation and progressively drenched with Russian fire denied any degree of flexibility yet bereft of any effective reinforcement. ... The situation of Third Panzer [army] and Fourth Army was serious: for the Ninth Army to the south it rapidly became catastrophic.”

A week after the launch of Operation Bagration the German defensive system had collapsed. The four Red Army fronts had liberated Vitebesk, Orsha, Moghilev and Bobruisk and pressed on towards Minsk. They had killed over 130,000 German soldiers, taken 66,000 prisoner and destroyed 900 German tanks and thousands of vehicles. Red Army casualties were so high that the 2nd Belorussian Front was forced to withdraw and recoup. Despite its heavy casualties the Red Army showed no signs of slackening the pace of its offensive.

The three German armies that comprised Army Group Centre were in disarray and in headlong retreat. They were ordered to follow a scorched earth policy that left no resources for the advancing Red Army which came across numerous German war crimes. John Erickson has noted that:

“Minsk, its factories dynamited and its installations wrecked, stood mostly in ruins; throughout most of Belorussia Soviet troops advanced through burned villages and broken towns, the livestock gone and the population fearfully thinned. More than once Red Army units came upon wagons loaded with children consigned to deportation to the Reich.”

Minsk, capital of Belorussia fell on 3 July, and the Red Army moved to encircle and destroy the German Fourth whose strength by then had fallen to around 105,000 men.

40,000 German soldiers died trying to break out of the Soviet encirclement. On 11 July the remnants of Fourth Army, out of ammunition and fuel, surrendered.

The Red Army had achieved total tactical and strategic success and torn a 250 mile gap in the German front leaving Army Group Centre with a meagre 8 divisions at its disposal.

Estimates of the staggering German losses suggest that Army Group Centre lost 25-28 divisions, over 450,000 men, while another 100,000 fell on the southern and northern fronts.

Soviet casualties were equally horrendous with the Red Army suffering over 230,000 killed and 800,000 wounded.

During the Red Army's whirlwind offensives of late June and July 1944 the Western Allies struggled to break out of their Normandy bridgehead. Operation Bagration and the accompanying offensives that took the Red Army to the eastern suburbs of Warsaw, had surpassed their initial objectives and broken the back of Germany's strongest army group leaving Hitler's regime staring defeat in the face.

Assessments of Operation Bagration

Assessments of the impact of Operation Bagration all agree that it dealt a devastating and catastrophic blow to the military capabilities of German fascism.

American historians David M. Gantz and Jonathan House have noted the dreadful consequences of Operation Bagration for the German Wehrmacht:

“The destruction of more than 30 divisions and the carnage wrought in a host of surviving divisions, accompanied by a Soviet mechanized advance in excess of 300 kilometres. It had decimated Army Group Centre, the strongest German army group, severely shaken Army Group South Ukraine, and brought the Red Army to the borders of the Reich.”

John Erickson in his evaluation of the historical importance of Operation Bagration has commented:

“ When Soviet armies shattered Army Group Centre, they achieved their greatest military success on the Eastern Front. For the German army in the east it was a catastrophe of unbelievable proportions, greater than that of Stalingrad,”

This assessment is supported by German and Soviet generals.

According to German military historian, General von Buttlar, Operation Bagration left the German Wehrmacht in disarray and shattered its ability to mount effective resistance to the Red Army. He observed that, ‘the rout of the Centre Group of Armies put an end to the organized resistance of Germans in the East.’

Marshal Zhukov in his memoirs gave a detailed assessment of the military and geo-political ramifications of Operation Bagration:

“In two months, Soviet troops had routed two big strategic German groupings, liberated Belorussia, completed the liberation of the Ukraine, and freed a considerable part of Lithuania and eastern Poland. In these battles, the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Belorussian Fronts and the 1st Baltic Front routed 70 divisions. Thirty divisions were routed by the 1st Ukrainian Front in the Lvov-Sandomir regions ... the defeat of the Centre and North Ukraine groups, the capture of three major bridgeheads on the Vistula and arrival at Warsaw brought our striking fronts close to Berlin, now only 600 km [370 miles] away ... Roumania and Hungary were close to withdrawal from the German alliance.”

During June-July 1944 Operation Bagration broke the back of the strongest military formation in the German Wehrmacht and dealt a mortal blow to German fascism from which it was unable to recover. The American narrative that D-Day dealt the mortal blow to German fascism does not stand up to close scrutiny.

The American military historians Glantz and House have observed that, ‘ ... despite the Germans’ need to direct new divisions and equipment eastward, throughout June and July the Wehrmacht was still able to contain the Allied bridgehead in Normandy.’

On 17 July 1944 57,000 German prisoners of war, captured during Operation Bagration, were paraded through the streets of Moscow. The motive for this was to scotch all talk that the Red Army had not played the decisive role in destroying the military capabilities of the German Wehrmacht.

Military historian John Erickson has noted how:

“Russians resented suggestions that German troops had been transferred from Belorussia westwards to fight off the invading Allied armies: the parade of the prisoners was in part designed to stifle ‘nonsensical’ talk of this kind. The main battle-front, and here Soviet commentators quoted directly from German cries of anguish, lay in the east where battles of ‘apocalyptic’ dimensions raged.”

Endnote

It is 75 years since the momentous events on the eastern front during the summer of 1944 that broke the back of German fascism and left it staring defeat in the face. We should celebrate this victory and remember the huge sacrifices made by the Red Army.

That said, we should not be complacent about the defeat of German fascism. The conditions that helped give birth to fascism are beginning to re-emerge and will be given a huge stimulus by the next global economic crisis.

Bertolt Brecht gave a warning about this when writing after World War Two. Brecht warned:

“Don’t rejoice in his defeat, you men. For though the world stood up and stopped the bastard. The bitch that bore him is in heat again.”

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