



Russian soldier captures enemy



German soldiers dash away after setting fire to barn outside Stalingrad

# The Enduring Relevance of the Battle for Stalingrad

By BRIAN HANLEY

**M**ore than six decades after the surrender of the Sixth Army and Fourth Panzer Army, some 50 years after the last German prisoner of war was allowed to return to what had once been his homeland, and a couple of generations after the place was renamed Volgograd, the mention of Stalingrad brings distinct images, even to minds untaught in history and geography.

In the months preceding the 2003 Iraq campaign, we were warned that the battle for Baghdad would become “another Stalingrad.” There was no shortage of editorials that argued that the earlier battle might forecast the nature of the impending struggle for the Iraqi capital. Analogies of this kind express just how catastrophic the battle for Stalingrad was.

In military circles, Stalingrad occupies a suitable place in officer development courses that focus on important battles. A campaign of Stalingrad’s proportions offers a multitude of lessons for the military. But what has yet to

be touched on specifically is an appraisal of the Stalingrad campaign that speaks directly to warfighters who value interservice comity and know-how above all else. To this end, this article argues that the Germans could have succeeded at Stalingrad if they had some of our ideas of joint operations and, of equal importance, our high standards in regard to professional integrity.

## A Flawed Strategy

Stalingrad was fought and lost by the finest collection of divisions in an army that had not known strategic defeat for a quarter of a century. Where did this collection go wrong? How could talented leaders blunder on such a massive scale? We study the battle for Stalingrad from the German point of view so that 50 years hence, students of military campaigns will not be asking similar questions about U.S. performance in whatever major clash of arms awaits us.

The battle for Stalingrad really began in the summer of 1940, when Adolf Hitler initiated

a plan to attack the Soviet Union (though he had made up his mind that war with Russia was inevitable nearly a year earlier). In the autumn of 1940, Hitler’s intuition told him that the defeat of Great Britain could be accomplished only by conquering Russia. The German army, and to a lesser extent the Luftwaffe, was as close to what we would understand as combat readiness as it ever would be. Morale was at a peak, and there was a core of combat-tested leaders at all levels, although the German equipment was wanting in major respects. In both numbers and quality of weapons, the Russians had the upper hand. The Wehrmacht possessed no tank that could go head-to-head with the Russian T-34 and KV-1, and more than half of the 3,200 Panzers assembled at the eastern frontier in June 1941 were thinly armored machines. The Mark I had 7.62-mm machineguns, the Mark II had 20-mm guns, and the Czech tanks were armed with 37-mm guns. The infantry was without a suitable assault weapon; the standard-issue K98 rifle, an old design but hardly obsolete, was of limited value given the scale, intensity, and conditions of combat that would prevail on the eastern front.

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Even so, the operational and tactical excellence of the soldiers who would employ that equipment was without equal.

Irrespective of the valor and resourcefulness of the combat troops, the military strategy that governed Germany's war on Russia and culminated in the Stalingrad disaster was

the Germans were unprepared, which reflects not only a failure in planning but also a robust and invincible self-deception. As good as it was, the German army that charged across the River Bug in June 1941 in Operation *Barbarossa* was essentially an expeditionary force working to annihilate an enemy that

be kept running without a proper inventory of spare parts. Too late, German industry created semitracked trucks, but they were never produced in sufficient numbers and, even if they had been, none were without major design shortcomings.

The German planning system failed from the start to coordinate ways, ends, and means—a circumstance that had not been corrected when the summer offensive kicked off in June 1942. The decision to persist in executing a bad strategic plan thrust the Germans toward a defeat at Stalingrad that led to Soviet Russia's triumph 2 years later. From February 1943 onward, after the last German soldier surrendered at Stalingrad, Germany could not expect to regain the strategic initiative. Its only realistic hope was to fight a defensive war that would prove so costly to the Soviet armies as to drive Stalin to the negotiating table.

The great loss of men and materiel at Stalingrad meant that the most important strategic objective, the capture of Moscow, fell forever out of reach. And so crippling was the Stalingrad debacle that it removed the need for a northern front, even though the armies investing Leningrad in the spring of 1943 could have mitigated, if not prevented, the massive defeats in the central and southern sectors in 1944.

### Practical Difficulties

Operation *Blue*, Hitler's summer offensive, largely duplicated the strategy of *Barbarossa*. The difference between the operations was one of scale. Directive 41 (April 5, 1942) ordered the Wehrmacht to "destroy the active fighting strength remaining to the Soviets and to take away as far as possible their most important resources of war." Hitler no longer had the forces to do this along the entire line, so Operation *Blue* focused on the southern sector of the eastern front. In four phases, the German army would destroy Soviet forces in the Don River Bend, capture the oil fields in the Caucasus, and shore up the front elsewhere until offensive power could be concentrated for further operations.

These ends were not beyond reason given what Hitler assumed to be the threadbare forces opposing him. But even if the intelligence estimates had been accurate rather than terribly wrong regarding Soviet strength and fighting spirit, Berlin's armies would have struggled to execute even this pared-down strategy. Hitler turned a precarious situation into a hopeless one by expanding the aims

## *the military strategy that governed Germany's war on Russia and culminated in the Stalingrad disaster was terribly flawed*

terribly flawed—a circumstance aggravated by the moral feebleness of the operational commanders on the scene. Military planners today would find the Wehrmacht's original objectives of capturing major centers of gravity unexceptionable: the Ukraine (Soviet Russia's industrial and agricultural heartland); Moscow (the seat of Russia's dictatorship and its industrial and communications nerve center); and Leningrad (a major port on the Baltic Sea and cradle of Bolshevism).

Achieving these objectives would give Germany mastery over Russia from Archangel to the banks of the Volga, isolating Stalin and the communist system that Hitler feared and detested on the Asian steppe. But Hitler also insisted that his armies destroy Russian forces in the field—a goal that could not be squared with the other objectives. The great encirclement battles of 1941 have never been matched: 9 major pockets and more than a dozen smaller ones yielded 3 million Russian prisoners, 14,000 tanks, and 25,000 guns, as well as heaps of other equipment. But these victories, spectacular though they were, enfeebled the Wehrmacht in such a way as to make its massive defeat before the gates of Moscow in December 1941 inevitable. In locking down Russian forces in positions called *kessels* (kettles or cauldrons), rather than bypassing them, the German armored columns racked up miles on their tracks and engines they could ill spare. The infantry divisions tasked to liquidate the pockets suffered enormous losses in men and material. Time was spent inefficiently in these encirclement battles rather than in storming Moscow before the autumn rains would hold up the mechanized spearheads, or at least before the unimaginably brutal winter would paralyze and debilitate them.

But even if the original objectives had been doggedly pursued, in one decisive respect

could be defeated only by a military establishment that was structured, provisioned, trained, and experienced in wars of attrition.

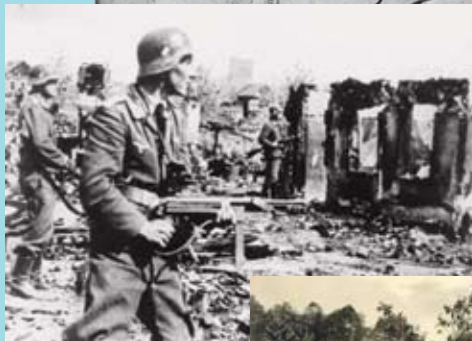


Germans find safety behind a wall

### Forever Out of Reach

To begin with, the German economy was not geared to support an effort of this kind. Moreover, the army was deliberately deprived of all supplies that would help the troops fight or withstand the Russian winter on the grounds that such items would demoralize the soldiery who, it was assumed, would fight better if they believed the war would be won in a few weeks.

In fact, the entire logistic system was a mess. Supplies were expected to move across great distances, without a proper road and rail network, to a front line constantly in flux. Also, the Germans had far too few trucks. The Opel Blitzes and Mercedes L3000 vehicles soon broke down under the strain of bad roads, excessive cargo, and questionable maintenance. The miscellany of captured vehicles the Germans had to rely on could not



Clockwise from left:  
Germans aim heavy artillery at Stalingrad; Germans view battlefield; Map of German campaign for seizure of Stalingrad; Soldiers run for cover behind damaged Panzer tank.

of his plan. On July 23, about a month after Operation *Blue* got under way, he issued a major revision: his armies were to destroy Soviet forces in the Rostov area immediately to the east of where the German forward line was held, push on to occupy the entire eastern coast of the Black Sea, and dispatch mobile forces to seize the main oil-producing areas, all in preparation for an offensive that would terminate at the north shore of the Persian Gulf. Maikop was the nearest objective at 200 miles southeast of the German front line. Astrakhan lay some 350 miles distant, Grozny 500 miles, and Baku a further 300 miles to the southeast of Grozny.

In addition, Hitler expected the Sixth Army—at 17 divisions, the largest and best equipped formation of its kind on the eastern front—to deny Russian forces the great volume of munitions, weapons, food, and oil produced in southern Russia by cutting the supply line at the Volga, immediately north of Stalingrad, which

was more than 200 miles east of the German front line in June 1942. According to Directive 42, the Sixth Army and the Fourth Panzer Army were “to attack Stalingrad, smash the enemy concentration there, take the town, and cut off the isthmus between the Don and the Volga.”

These expanded strategic ends were beyond the means of the German army—and given the indeterminate character of his revised plan, Hitler’s strategy in the south was perhaps not attainable without great risk by any army any time. First, expecting armored spearheads to plunge hundreds of miles further into enemy territory from a start point hundreds of miles from the German homeland to seize towns and encircle and annihilate enemy forces is contrary to sound operational and strategic judgment. Even if the enemy puts up only feeble resistance, flanks are well guarded, and all attacks on the flanks fail immediately, embarking on such a course would provoke one logistic crisis after

another. Armored columns require massive quantities of supplies when the objectives are as expansive as Hitler’s, so it makes good sense for them to advance at the head, or as part, of a broad offensive front. That allows these formations to remain within reach of supply dumps and field repair shops.

Hitler took no account of these practical difficulties, nor did he take notice of the additional psychological and physical strain his revised objectives would place on his troops. The Wehrmacht was already weakened by fighting the previous winter. German factory production could not keep up with demand for critical weapons systems—tanks and armored personnel carriers, for instance—and the Soviets were growing stronger and, as strategists and tacticians, wiser by the day. The Russians had every good reason to trade space for time, the objective being to lure Hitler’s armies—his most capable formations in particular—into a trap from which they could not escape. Unintentionally, Hitler collaborated with the Russian High Command on its plan of strategic retreat, to be followed by a series of massive counterstrokes.

### Running Out of Options

The Sixth Army began to engage Russian forces outside Stalingrad in late July 1942. By August 23, advance elements had secured the west bank of the Volga immediately north of Stalingrad. At that moment, it appeared that Hitler’s plan, reckless though it was, just might work. From a strategic standpoint, the mission of the Sixth Army and the Fourth Panzer Army was successful. Soviet river traffic fell under German artillery fire, the rail line running north from Stalingrad was in German hands, and the Luftwaffe had free play of the skies, allowing it to pummel the industrial and transportation systems, as well as the civilian population within the city. As a hub of arms production and the movement of raw materials, Stalingrad was knocked out of the war.

Operationally, however, the situation was much murkier for the Germans by late September. Unlike the preceding weeks when the fighting took place on the steppes and in the suburbs, the Russians began to put up a stiff resistance within Stalingrad proper—though German tactics made it easier for the outnumbered and outgunned Soviets to stall the German advance. Instead of seizing the western bank of the Volga, which would have isolated Russian forces in the city and cut off the ferrying of troops and supplies across

the river each night, the Germans attacked the city on a broad front: from the northwest, the west, and the southwest. Advances, always costly in troops, quickly petered out because of pockets of resistance behind the front line, or because the Germans absorbed a critical mass of casualties in exchange for short and often evanescent gains.

Scarcely less important, the Germans had no choice but to use their primary offensive weapon, the Panzer force, entirely in a support role as assault groups. Within Stalingrad, the Panzers were usually employed



Russians celebrate victory after 200 days of fighting

*Hitler turned a precarious situation into a hopeless one by expanding the aims of his plan*

in small groups (three and four per engagement) and under conditions that favored the defender. Fighting in the dust, darkness, and clutter of a bombed-out city gives prominence to a tank's weakness—a large, noisy, smoking target that does not offer its crew the agility on which its survival depends—while minimizing its strength.

What made the Panzer arm effective was not its firepower, which was always second-rate compared with Russian machines, but its maneuverability and mutual support in formation. The three Panzer divisions (14<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup>) and the three motorized divisions (3<sup>d</sup>, 29<sup>th</sup>, 60<sup>th</sup>) committed to Stalingrad thus would have been more effectively employed as a mobile reserve, ready to annihilate any kind of flanking offensive or counter a deep puncture in the front line. German intelligence told the High Command that the Russians had no strategic reserves left, but military prudence and a knowledge of military history should have kept the Germans from risking all on mere reports. One knows for certain that the enemy has no reserves only when that enemy has been completely, irrevocably subdued. As John Keegan argues, "Intelligence in war, however good, does not point out unerringly the path to victory. Victory is an elusive prize, bought with blood rather than brains. Intelligence is the handmaiden, not the mistress, of the warrior."<sup>1</sup> Hitler was certain that no intelligence service could be expected to deliver.

### Prestige versus Lives

The operational and tactical aspects of the battle are what most readily come to mind when one thinks of Stalingrad. By October 1942, after nearly 2 months of a contest marked by unprecedented brutality, the Germans were in charge of almost the entire city but without the strength to hold out should something go wrong. By early November, after the final attempt to take the city had run its course, the Sixth Army was exhausted. Most formations were reduced to a fraction of their original complement of men and equipment. At both the operational and tactical levels, the battle for Stalingrad was effectively lost. The Germans had taken a mass of casualties and lost hundreds of tanks, vehicles, and weapons with nothing to show for it but gathering catastrophe.

At the strategic level, chaos had begun to assert itself many weeks earlier. In late September, Hitler quarreled with and then dismissed his chief of staff, General Franz Halder, whose well-grounded misgivings about the Stalingrad campaign affronted Hitler's understanding of what was at stake. Halder argued for a strategic withdrawal from the city not only because of the casualties and the attendant weaknesses of the extended flanks, but also because the original strategic objective had since been attained—a fact Hitler would concede in a situation briefing 12 days after firing Halder.

As Hitler looked at the matter, however, seizing the city became above all else a matter of prestige—a word always fraught with meaninglessness when a head of state balances it against the lives of his soldiers. Capturing

Stalingrad would humiliate Stalin. The world would take note of communism being smashed under the boot of national socialism and marvel at Hitler's strategic genius and the invincibility of his armies.

Russian armies, which had been assembling on the periphery of the Stalingrad combat zone since late summer, attacked the thinly held flanks of Friedrich von Paulus' army with overwhelming force on November 19. By November 23, the encirclement of the Sixth Army and parts of the Fourth Panzer Army was complete. The Hungarian, Italian, and Romanian armies guarding the flanks and rear areas had been torn to pieces. Despite what was by any sensible reckoning a serious defeat that could only ripen into a strategic calamity if the trapped forces did not break out immediately, Hitler ordered his generals in the pocket to stand fast; he would send forces under General Erich von Manstein to break in. A supply corridor would be maintained until spring, when the offensive was expected to resume.

By Christmas Eve, however, the quixotic attempt by General von Manstein to relieve the Sixth Army had failed 2 weeks after it began. In the meantime, Russian armies pushed the German line some 200 miles west. The Russians assaulted the *kessel* on January 10, 1943. German troops fought valiantly but in a hopeless cause. On January 31, von Paulus surrendered, though remnants of the 11<sup>th</sup> Corps, isolated in the northern part of the city, did not capitulate until February 2.

For the Germans, it was a disaster beyond imagination. Two German armies

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## THE BATTLE FOR STALINGRAD

were removed from the order of battle. Some 100,000 troops, including 2,000 officers and 22 generals, marched into captivity. Perhaps 1 in 20 survived the ordeal that followed. Antony Beevor estimates that, all told, the Axis armies—including the satellite forces—lost more than half a million troops between August and the final surrender at Stalingrad.<sup>2</sup> The loss of equipment was on an equally catastrophic scale.

### The Moral Factor

Hitler is to blame for the Stalingrad debacle. He did not have the means to achieve his vast and at times incompatible objectives, and when his military chief of staff told him as much he was removed from his position. As J.F.C. Fuller has argued, the German army would have achieved its strategic objective—denying the Russian war machine vital raw materials produced in the south—by taking both banks of the Volga many miles north of Stalingrad.<sup>3</sup> Such a plan would have squared ways, ends, and means, though the prestige Hitler attached to taking the city outright might never have been realized. Scarcely less significant was that Hitler's manner of proceeding was wasteful. When Hitler realized that Stalingrad could not be seized without bleeding his armies as they had never been bled before, the Nazi leader rejected advice from his commanders about aligning his strategic objectives with his operational plan and forces available.

While Hitler is due the largest share of the blame, his generals bear responsibility as well. For starters, they did not push for freedom of action until after the Germans had been effectively defeated in early November; what the Russians did after November 19 was basically a harvesting operation. The German generals on the scene only conceded the obvious after the hour for action was long past, when there was nothing to do but strike an indignant pose. It would have been far better for the Sixth Army leadership to resign en masse when General Halder was sacked in September than to continue endorsing a strategy they had to know was destructive. The generals rightly feared Hitler, for he might have imprisoned them for defying him or sent them before a firing squad. But the lives of one's troops always come first—and in any case, why should the generals persist in being careless with their soldiers while being overly scrupulous about their careers? Indeed, there was a possibility that Hitler would back

down, as he later would to Manstein and Heinz Guderian. At the least, the commanders might have surrendered when there was nothing to be gained by continuing the fight. No matter how well a campaign is planned, no matter how finely equipped and trained and battle-hardened an army is for a campaign, the moral qualities of the leadership remain of the highest importance.

The Stalingrad campaign took for granted that German forces would always prevail, no matter what the specific details of a given engagement. The German soldier at all levels was superior to his Russian counterpart—his morale was higher as well—and in any case, the High Command was convinced in the summer of 1942 that the Russians had no strategic reserves left. According to a capabilities-based approach to warfighting, the Germans were right to proceed as they did and would probably have defeated the Russians at Stalingrad—just as the Russians would have crushed the Germans in the opening weeks of Operation *Barbarossa*.

If the German experiences in Russia teach us anything, it is that capabilities wargaming can foster an atmosphere of overconfidence that is rooted in a narrow concern for material circumstances. Wargame directors should always throw in an implausible episode or detail, if only to encourage us to expect surprise and to help us cultivate prudence and resourcefulness.

Military leadership, irrespective of time and place, is at heart a moral activity. It is quality of character, not technical virtuosity or even managerial ability, that ultimately wins or loses the day. Wisdom, humility, compassion, and intelligent perseverance are the wellsprings of outstanding officership in peace but most especially in war. This is every bit as true for von Paulus at Stalingrad as it was for Agamemnon before Troy—and it is true for the joint warfighter today. **JFQ**

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> John Keegan, *Intelligence in War* (New York: Knopf, 2003), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Antony Beevor, *Stalingrad: The Fateful Siege: 1942–1943* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 398.

<sup>3</sup> J.F.C. Fuller, *A Military History of the Western World* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1956).