

Battle of Stalingrad

To what extent did German tactical mistakes affect the outcome of the Battle of Stalingrad?

History

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Introduction

During the Second World War, Germany and Russia fought from the opposing sides. Germany was fighting under the leadership of Adolf Hitler, who gave the directions and commands in the war. During the war, the Russians used Stalingrad as the center of communication. This made Stalingrad extremely important for Russia. On the other side, Germany developed interests in the city due to the oil fields that Stalingrad was surrounded by. The contradicting interests led to the battle for the city that occurred in the winter of 1942. Poor leadership of the army in attacking Stalingrad led to the defeat of the German army and a turning point for World War II. Germany lost the Battle of Stalingrad due to several mistakes such as underestimation of expected resistance, Hitler's disregard of the Generals' advice, poor planning, weather and depletion of resources. Also, Russia's defense was very strong which also played a part in the German defeat.

The Operation Barbarossa

In the mid twentieth century, the state of peace in the world was fragile. Many countries lived in fear of attacks from other nations. The military power of many countries was not strong enough to defend any powerful attack from an enemy. This caused countries to begin the formation of allies to combine their military force and secure their borders. In September 1940, Germany, Italy, and Japan signed a pact for military collaboration in the region (Martel 202). The Tripartite agreement had the name the Axis Powers. In support of the Tripartite, countries such as Hungary and Romania joined in November of the same year. By the time the Second World War started, the Axis power had seven countries in the war (Bendersky 21). The countries combined their military forces and worked together towards common goals such as the expansion of territories

and acquisition of new lands. However, the countries in the Tripartite were unable to coordinate their activities with each country working separately (Bendersky 24).

Among the countries, Germany had the strongest army. The training of the military was much more superior to the other nations (Griess et al. 82). Therefore, the country had higher dictatorial power as compared to other nations. As the stronger force, Hitler believed that he deserved to occupy the Romanian oil field, which his country depended on for supply (Kort 31). However, the Russians whom Hitler considered weaker than his forces already occupied these oil fields (Kort 36). Hitler's belief of being superior to the Russians and seeing them as "untermensch" who could not stand up to the Germans was reflected later on when Hitler decided that the Army Group South could take the Caucasus and interdict the Volga simultaneously rather than attacking them separately. This proved to be one of the biggest mistakes that Germany and especially Hitler made (Pinkus 325). The preparation of the invasion required a strong team to counter the resistance. Apart from the interest in the oil fields, Hitler aimed at capturing the people in the region and using them as slaves (Pinkus 294). The Germans would then occupy the lands and enjoy the services from the slaves. The Soviet territory was also famous for the agricultural productivity. Hitler understood that capturing the area would increase the agricultural yield in the country as well as a clean and constant supply of oil (Glantz 137). Therefore, Germany's plans were very realistic and there was a justified reason to invade Russia from the German point of view. Before the war began, Germany had potential to win due to them having so much dictatorial power and such a strong military. In fact, they were the favorites to win. However, due to several reasons, Germany unexpectedly lost the war.

Due to the interests of the Germans in the region, the area became a point of fundamental interest for their leader Hitler. Hitler and his generals planned to invade the Soviet Union in May

1941 (Ringer 15). However, the country was still busy with other invasions in countries such as Greece and Yugoslavia. Due to the seriousness of the situation in the Soviet Union, it was impossible for the country to concentrate on the invasion of Greece, Yugoslavia, and Russia at the same time (Mercatante 84). Therefore, Hitler decided that the most appropriate plan was to delay the invasion of the Soviet Union until the completion of the other missions. Due to the change of plans, the Soviet Union invasion was delayed until late June. The delay of more than a month ensured that the Germans had an army that was robust enough to counter expected resistance from the Russians (Mercatante 92). However, this delay meant that the war in Russia would drag on into the harsh Russian winter, which was a major mistake done by the Germans. The late start to the war can be considered one of the biggest mistakes that the Germans made.

The Invasion

In preparation for the invasion, Hitler appointed Paulus as the leader of the army. The group responsible for the attack was the Sixth Army, which composed of 1,011,500 men (Zeimke 32). All the soldiers had ample training and very professional due to experience in other invasions. Hitler provided the army with 10,290 artillery guns for use in the attack (Zeimke 32). On top of the weapons, general Paulus had 675 tanks at his disposal as well as 1,216 planes for aerial attacks (Vogel and Farrell 173). Hitler knew that capturing Stalingrad would be Germany's "gateway" to the oil rich Caucasus and it would be a huge loss to the Russians. However, Joseph Stalin considered the town to be important for Russia. In preparation for the invasion, he appointed General Zhukov as the leader of the resistance. At his disposal, was an army of 1,000,500 men (Zeimke 38). Stalin went ahead to arm the teams with 13,541 artillery guns (Zeimke 36). In matching the expected invasion, Zhukov received 894 tanks and 1,115 planes for

the battle (Matanle 172). The Russians could not risk losing the city to the Germans because it would mean slavery of the people as well as loss of all the resources supplied by the oil fields. The Germans, on the other side, felt that capturing the city would show their dominance in the region as well as capturing the oil fields and the financial gains that would come from it (Matanle 54). On the 22nd of June, Hitler directed the armies towards the south for a full invasion of the Soviet Union. As the Germans approached, the Russians prepared for a counter offensive and the battle officially begun on that infamous day. The Germans launched the attack with multiple airstrikes in the city (Kapeikis 10). The air raids extensively covered Kronstadt, Ismail, and Sevastopol. The Red Army deployed by the Soviets to protect the city could not push back the attack. At the beginning of the war, it was clear that the German forces were too strong for the Soviet Union (Martel 169). Due to little resistance by the Soviet forces, the Germans miscalculated the Soviet power and saw the invasion as a simple task that would end within three months (Glantz 56). However, this was not the case and during this time, the Soviet Union was working towards motivating people to join in the war and protect the city in what they called a "Patriotic war" (Glantz 61). The air strikes crippled the command and control center of the Soviets. On the morning of June 23rd, Stalin ordered the troops to attack any army from the axis to protect the city (Bendersky 89). The violation of the borders treaty by the Germans was an act of war, which required an immediate and strong response (Bendersky 88).

Stalin ordered airstrikes on the German forces as a counter offensive move. The German Army formed 150 groups with powerful armory and attacked the city from various sides (Müller and Ueberschär 79). In the history of war, the invasion was the strongest ever. Countries such as Finland and Romania contributed further troops into the force adding on to the offensive force (Ringer 114). In the comparison of the weapons, the Soviet Union had a higher number of

weapons but lower in power and skill. As the Germans progressed, the Soviet Union called up more people and increased their troops by a huge number without the knowledge of the German Intelligence teams (Zeimke 93). Thus, the Germans experienced new resistance immediately after conquering the original team. Therefore, the Germans would capture a city during the day, and the fresh forces from the Soviet Union would recover the city at night (Kort 256). The miscalculations and underestimation of the Soviet forces marked the beginning of the downfall of the German forces under the command of Hitler.

As the war progressed, the Germans took in more slaves from the Soviet Union (Bendersky 221). The tactical approach of the city with armored vehicles from the North, South, East, and West caught the Soviet Union by surprise (Kort 147). In mid-July, the German forces started experiencing setbacks because of the weather. At first, the weather was dry making it easy for the German machines to move at high speed. However, the muddy terrain after the rain slowed down the progress of the German army (Kort 201). In addition to the weather, the Soviet Union resulted in burning the bridges as they retreated making the advance of the German army impossible. Further destruction was evident in the steel factories where the Soviets destroyed the rail system and transported the iron towards the eastern region (Matanle 271). This ensured that the Germans would not benefit from the railway system in making their advance towards Stalingrad. Mid-July saw the German forces less than 400 kilometers from Moscow (Pinkus 103). However, the leadership of the army was in conflict with Hitler's desire of diversion, which proved costly for the Germans.

The Army leadership targeted Moscow as the primary objectives of the invasion. Hitler, on the contrary, wanted the military to divert south east of the country with a minor group focusing on Stalingrad (Griess et al. 129). This diversion later proved to be a costly mistake due

to the Germans not having enough troops to protect Stalingrad. As winter approached, the German Army separated into two fronts under the command of Hitler (Griess et al. 131). One group was to focus on capturing Moscow under the leadership of Bock. The other group was ordered to head towards the Caucasus with Dnieper as the leader. The weather presented a huge challenge to Bock (Vogel and Brian 129). The troops were also tired, and the commanders advised that the troops took a break. However, Bock disregarded the advice due to the belief that the war was almost over (Vogel and Brian 181). In November and December, the German troops suffered from extreme cold due to the winter. They had not planned for such weather and their apparel was not good enough to keep them warm during the cold winter (White 163). During this time, the Soviet Union showed great resistance to the German forces with the weather favoring them.

Unlike the Germans, the Soviets had ample dressing, and their weapons could operate under the low temperatures (Bendersky 153). As for the Germans, poor planning had led to them not having cold-resistant clothes, the artillery and the vehicles could not move in the current weather rendering them helpless (Ringer 217). Almost a million German soldiers were victims of the poor weather by November only (White 174). The fuel in the tanks was running out but Hitler could not allow the team to retreat (Kort 98). Due to the problems, the team was not strong enough to protect Rostov, which the Soviet Union recaptured (Kort 106). General Zhukov, the leader of the Soviet Union, ordered the first counter offensive strike to the team led by Bock. Zhukov understood that the team was not in a position to anticipate such an attack and they were not able give any resistance (Matanle 297). Zhukov and his team were used to the weather and had no trouble with fighting in the cold.

Zhukov used six armies, which surrounded the city trapping the Germans in Stalingrad (Matanle 305). After realizing that defeat was unpreventable, Paulus requested to break the trap and retreat, but Hitler directed him to fight to the last man (Kort 120). The pride in Hitler could not allow the team to be defeated. A combination of the weather that froze their hands to the extent of being unable to fire their guns and the huge counter offensive deployed by the Soviet Union made the Sixth Army helpless. The perimeter created by the Soviet troops made sure that the team could not receive any outside help (Matanle 307). Also, the sixth army had already ran out of food and nutrition. The team had no choice but to surrender (Matanle 309). The loss at Stalingrad resulted in the capture of 91,000 prisoners and a loss of equipment and workforce by the Germans (Kort 142). The Soviet Union lost many people during the war, but the victory gave them a consolation (Griess et al. 376). The humiliation caused by Paulus due to the defeat and surrendering led to him being demoted by Hitler.

Poor Military Leadership

The failure at Stalingrad marked the turning point of the Second World War (Müller and Ueberschär 111). The win by the Soviet Union was unexpected which left the Germans in a massive confusion. Inadequate military leadership by Hitler resulted in the defeat and capture of the Sixth army. Without the poor leadership, it was possible for the military to win the war and reduce the number of casualties that the country experienced (Müller and Ueberschär 252). However, Hitler failed to take responsibility for the failure and instead blamed Paulus for the defeat. Instead of appreciating and understanding the efforts made by Paulus and the sixth army, Hitler demoted Paulus, a clear indication of his anger. The German defeat was a pure case of poor leadership for the military.

The first mistake by the German military was underestimation of the Soviet Union. Despite the fact that Germany had better weapons compared to the Soviet Union, Hitler underestimated the expected resistance. Previously he had predicted that the war would only last three months. That estimation was a pure miscalculation, which led to the defeat. The team underestimated the number of soldiers expected in the resistance. The Soviet Union took advantage of the underestimation and marshaled up more people without the knowledge of the Germans (Zeimke 93). Therefore, the Germans ended up encountering new forces after defeating the first troops. The new troops had more energy and capitalized on the element of surprise (Zeimke 94). Therefore, it became harder for the German forces to advance with the normal speed due to the emerging resistance after every defeat of the red army (Ringer 141). This underestimation of the Soviet Union's resistance was also evident in Hitler's decision to take the Caucasus and interdict the Volga simultaneously rather than attacking them separately. The original plan (Operation BLUE), originally called for sequential attacks (Vogel and Brian 111). The plan was to first attack Stalingrad and then the Caucasus. However, due to Hitler's belief of the Russians being "untermensch" and the Germans being superior he thought that these attacks could be done concurrently (Pinkus 325). He split the Army Group South into two separate groups, group A and group B. Group A was to proceed to the Caucasus, and group B would interdict the Volga river at Stalingrad (Pinkus 327). This spread the army and didn't allow enough forces to protect and take Stalingrad.

The second error in leadership was a disregard of the advice of the generals. Hitler was anxious to achieve his war aims quickly and tended to not listen to the information and advice given to him by the military generals (Zeimke 347). For example, the army generals advised him that it was not right for the military to fight on two fronts. Dividing the army meant that the

collective force would reduce. In Stalingrad, the division was an advantage to the Soviet Union since the expected offensive was smaller making the resistance successful. However, Hitler disregarded the advice and directed one side of the army to focus on capturing the city of Moscow while the other group head south towards the Caucus (Glantz 256). Further divisions in the army caused by Hitler's decision to not listen to the General Staff and to not follow the Operation Blue had immediate effects on the German chances of capturing their main targets (Glantz 270). Due to these divisions, the team reduced drastically in number and it made it impossible to hold Stalingrad during the night or recapture Stalingrad during the day (White 162). The disregard of the advice of the generals led to the defeat at Stalingrad and the massive loss of lives by the soldiers.

Apart from the division of the team, Hitler forced Paulus to continue fighting despite of Paulus begging to retreat (Bendersky 185). When the Soviet Union barricaded the city with the German Forces inside, Paulus requested Hitler to allow him to break the barrier from one side and retreat. The decision to retreat was a tactical move because the chances of winning were minimal. By retreating, Paulus was ensuring that the Sixth army would not undergo further casualties from the war (Bendersky 184). However, Hitler gave strict orders to Paulus to continue with the war to the last man (Bendersky 185). The Sixth army lost a huge number of soldiers to the Soviet Union. If Hitler had not been so attached and stuck with the idea of being superior to other countries and paid close attention to the Army Generals, the losses experienced would have been lower. It was possible for the Sixth army to survive with minor casualties if Hitler allowed them to retreat at the immediate moment when Paulus sensed defeat (Zeimke 177).

The leadership of the German military had poor planning for the war. Firstly, the war was delayed since the Germany was invading Greece and Yugoslavia. During the time of delay, the leadership of the German army failed to plan for the unforgiving Russian winter. During the winter, the temperatures drop to about -30 degrees Celsius. The machinery used by the Germans could not function effectively in low temperatures (Pinkus 301). Therefore, the ineffective planning failed to consider the effects of the weather on the artillery especially in the middle of the war (Vogel and Brian 184). The failure of the machinery to work efficiently in the low temperatures was one of the main reasons behind the failure by the army (Pinkus 301). After the rains, the roads became very muddy. The vehicles used by the Germans did not have the ability to move fast on the muddy roads (Pinkus 305). The hindrance to movement gave the Soviet Union an upper hand in the war. The Russian fighters could easily escape from the German soldiers due to the poor terrain (Pinkus 313).

Apart from the machinery, the soldiers suffered massively from the weather; the soldiers became inactive in the cold (White 170). The soldiers froze, and their fingers were unable to operate the artillery (White 171). The German leadership of the military failed to provide the Sixth army with clothes that could keep them warm during the winter period. Many soldiers died during the time making the army weaker and weaker (Griess et al. 183). On the other side, the Soviet Union soldiers had enough training to survive the weather. The soldiers had enough clothing to keep them warm and ensure that no casualties were caused by the weather alone (Matanle 211). More so, the vehicles and tanks used by the Soviet Union had the ability to operate efficiently in the cold weather (Matanle 207). The weather gave the Russians a chance to launch many counter offensive strikes, which ensured their victory (Bendersky 165). Poor planning was a huge factor in the defeat and loss of the Sixth Army.

More leadership failure was visible in depletion of the available resources. To reach Stalingrad, German soldiers travelled an extremely long distance through foreign hostile territory (Mercatante 243). This distance posed a huge challenge for the Germans because of overstretched communication and supply lines (Mercatante 244). Due to the extremely long supply lines, it was nearly impossible to keep a constant stream of food, ammunition and other resources to the soldiers in the battlefields. The team heading towards Moscow suffered a shortage of fuel for the tanks. Without the fuel, the tanks became useless to the team (Pinkus 172). Besides, the food reserves for the army depleted (Zeimke 182). The food shortage compromised the productivity of the group since the teams could not cope with the cold and hunger combined (Zeimke 186). The massive miscalculation of the reserves came from the estimation that the invasion and takeover would not last over three months (Glantz 56). In the tactical counter offensive of the Soviet Union, they surrounded the city and locked the German Army inside. Without any clear route to receive food or any supplies for the team, the battle was heading towards a short end (Müller and Uebershär 274). The military leadership failed to put plans in place to ensure the Sixth army would not run out of supplies throughout the war.

From the beginning of the War until the end, the Germans underestimated the Soviet Union. The underestimation led to a miscalculation of the time required to complete the invasion and the supplies needed to sustain the forces (Glantz 84). It was the responsibility of the leadership of the military to ensure the team has enough supplies to last until the end of the war. The Sixth army suffered from the poor tactical approach (Mercatante 150). They lacked the tactics to be able to express dominance and defend the captured areas. For example, the Soviet Union recaptured most of the cities at night after the Germans conquered them during the day (White 162). Such tactical errors from the leadership delayed any major progress from the team.

The invasion of Stalingrad took longer than expected, which led to depletion of resources and the loss for the German team.

However, it can't be forgotten that the Soviets had a very strong defense led by one of the greatest military commanders of all time General Zhukov. Instead of being defeated by the Nazis, the Soviets fought back. The major reason for the strong defense that the Soviets had was that they were able to swiftly recover and rebuild industrial and military capacity (Martel 199). This was due to their nationalized planned economy (Martel 197). The Soviets were able to dismantle their 1,500 factories in the West and move them east of the Ural Mountains where they were beyond the reach of the Germans (Mercatante 307). This meant that the Soviets were producing continuously immense amounts of weaponry while the Germans were running out of resources. By mobilizing their factories and economy, the USSR managed to out-produce the Germans and this was a huge advantage to them (Mercatante 323).

Also, another reason for the strong Russian defense was that the soldiers were extremely motivated to protect their home country (Kort 402). The Soviet working class was fighting to defend the gains of the October Revolution (Kort 414). The Russian people believed that there were things worth dying for in order to protect their homeland. Also, the Russian civilians were extremely motivated to fight (Zeimke 301). Russia had a whole generation of young and old people who joined rifle clubs and learned marksmanship as a rite of passage (Zeimke 298). The Germans didn't know that the average Russian knew how to accurately shoot a rifle. This might not seem like a big thing, but in Stalingrad, snipers were the combatants of choice making it a decisive factor (Zeimke 311). This meant that Russia didn't just have more motivated fighters than Germany, but Russia also had a larger amount of skilled shooters to protect Stalingrad.

Conclusion

Operation Barbarossa marked the failure of the Germans and a turning point of the Second World War. The city of Stalingrad was important to Hitler due to the oil reserves that Germany considered critical. However, the German army committed serious errors in the invasion of Stalingrad. For example, the team failed to plan for the expected winter, which rendered their weapons and soldiers useless. Secondly, the war lasted longer leading to depletion of resources such as fuel for the tanks and food for the army. Such errors from the military leadership compromised the chances of success for the team. Besides, Hitler disregarded the advice of the generals in retreating from the war. Inability to retreat led to the failure of the teams in fulfilling the primary objectives of the invasion. Salvaging the Sixth army was possible, but Hitler commanded Paulus to fight until the last man rendering their chances very dim. The failure by the Sixth team in the invasion of Stalingrad was due to poor leadership by the military and strong Russian defense, which lead to the German defeat.

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