

The Battle of Stalingrad – Geographical Considerations

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Napoleon said, "Never interrupt your enemy when he is making a mistake" (Brainy Quote, 2010, p. 3). During the Battle of Stalingrad, August 1942 to January 1943, Adolf Hitler made huge mistakes. By ordering the German Sixth Army to attack Stalingrad, Hitler committed a military blunder so immense that it cost Germany an entire army and set the stage for Germany's ultimate defeat in World War Two. However, loss of the Sixth Army could have been avoided if Hitler and his cronies had taken the time to rationally consider the geographical factors which could put their forces at risk. The combination of poor decision-making and unfavorable topography was too much for the Sixth Army to overcome as Soviet defenders took full advantage of their enemy's mistakes to score a spectacular victory.

At Stalingrad, the Germans lost almost 400,000 men; their Italian allies lost 130,000 men and their other allies, the Hungarians and Romanians together lost approximately 320,000 men (Bullock, 1962, p. x). This enormous loss of manpower marked the end of Hitler's vaunted Sixth Army, which had borne the brunt of the battle, and the beginning of the end of Hitler's attempt to achieve what he termed "a world decisive victory of the have nots" (Domarus, 2004, p. 2664). How could such a huge military force, one that had managed to penetrate so deeply inside the Soviet Union, have suffered such a monumental and catastrophic reversal?

Prior to the start of the battle, German military forces, often spearheaded by the Sixth Army (Craig, 1973, p. 4), had overrun and occupied much of Europe and were driving inexorably across North Africa toward the Suez Canal in Egypt. German forces seemed invincible, unstoppable; a virtual juggernaut. Yet at Stalingrad this mighty military machine, a force that up to that time was unmatched by any other in the world, was not only stopped in its tracks but suffered a defeat so complete as to change the course of the entire war (Parker, 1/28/43, p. 7). This outcome was directly attributable to the failure of German military planners, led by Adolf Hitler, to appreciate the unique topographical and climatic conditions of Stalingrad and its environs. Their negligence resulted in faulty decision making at both the tactical and strategic level and was directly responsible for the subsequent annihilation of the German Sixth Army.

Stalingrad, now known as Volgograd, is a large industrial city located in a remote part of southwestern part of European Russia. It is 558 miles southeast of Moscow; 1,380 miles southeast of Berlin, Germany; 964 miles northwest of Tehran, Iran; 274 miles northwest of the Caspian Sea and 411 miles northeast of the Black Sea. The city is situated on the west bank of the Volga River, the longest river in Russia, and is 43 miles east of the Don River, another major river. The region surrounding Stalingrad is sparsely populated. The nearest large city is Rostov, 244 miles to the southwest, near the Black Sea. Stalingrad stood at the

gateway to the Caucasus and Baku oil fields to the south, among the largest oil fields in the world, and whoever controlled Stalingrad controlled access to those major oil reserves as well as the flow of traffic and supplies between northern and southern Russia.

To defeat the Soviets at Stalingrad, the Germans had to gain control of the Don and Volga rivers, two large rivers in the region which could impede an army's advance (Craig, 1973, p. 4). Failure to secure those rivers would permit the Soviets to build up their forces further east and north of the city, out of reach of the Germans, and launch a counteroffensive. It was therefore critical that the Soviets maintain their foothold in Stalingrad. Concomitantly, the loss of Stalingrad would allow the Germans to build up their forces on the east bank of the Volga, then pursue and destroy Soviet forces now cut off from their line of supplies from the south, drive on to Moscow, scatter the Soviet government and force the Soviets out of the war.

To reach Stalingrad, German forces had to travel over one thousand miles through hostile, foreign territory. The sheer distance that the army had to travel posed a daunting challenge for the Germans, not only because of overstretched communication and supply lines but also because of the psychological effect it had on the soldiers who felt overwhelmed by the vastness of the Russia landscape (Russian Topography, 2005). For some German soldiers, Russia seemed like a desert – villages were far apart, wells were infrequent and the countryside was flat and desolate. German soldiers disliked having to travel through such inhospitable country (Parker, 12/29/42, p. 4).

Another problem for the Germans was the harsh climatic conditions endemic to the Stalingrad region. During the summer the temperature can reach 30 degrees centigrade, which can fatigue soldiers during long marches. In the autumn, rains start in October and last for a month, turning roads into quagmires thick with mud. The mud of the autumn is quickly followed by the onset of the bitter Russian winter. The Germans were ill prepared for such conditions and frostbite was rife, causing almost as many casualties as combat. Lice infections were the norm; other severe illnesses, such as respiratory diseases, cystitis and dysentery often occurred. Their equipment fared little better. Weapons had to be kept completely free of oil to prevent them from freezing. In some cases, vehicles and artillery pieces simply froze to the ground and became immovable. After winter came the spring thaw and a return to the muddy conditions of autumn (Russian Topography, 2005). One contemporary report described the countryside around Stalingrad as "extremely difficult" with "much swamp and low lying forest" which became impassable for tanks and heavy equipment during heavy rains (Parker, 8/30/42, p. 1). At the end of October 1942, climatic conditions at Stalingrad had changed from hot and dry to wet, with cold rains interspersed with snow squalls beating down on the city severe enough to enable the Soviets to throw back a German tank attack on a mile-long front inside the city (*NY Times*, 10/25/42, p. E1). This Soviet victory was credited to "Grandfather Winter" (*NY Times*, 10/25/42, p. E1). Often the

Germans had to use horses and sleighs to move equipment when motor vehicles were incapacitated because of the weather (Russian Topography, 2005). It was in these exceedingly rough weather conditions that the German Sixth Army had to fight. At Stalingrad, German material losses were estimated as heavier than those of the British in the evacuations of Dunkirk, Greece and Norway taken together (Parker, 1/28/43, p. 7).

For Adolf Hitler, the battle of Stalingrad was part of a much larger strategy aimed at seizing control of the Middle East and most of the world's oil supply. Germany itself had access to very little oil; nowhere nearly enough to sustain its far flung military operations. Accordingly, Hitler devised a plan to gain access to the oil his war machine needed to remain in the field. His plan was to divide his forces in southwest Russia into two groups, group A and group B, the latter spearheaded by the Sixth Army; send group A southwest to destroy Soviet forces in Rostov and neutralize the enemy's ports and fleet in the Black Sea while group B would proceed east to Stalingrad, block the land corridor connecting the Volga and the Don, thereby cutting off Soviet forces in the north and allowing German forces to gain control of the Caspian Sea, and the oil fields in that area. Then German forces would drive further south into Iran and link up with German forces that had pushed their way east through North Africa toward Iraq and the oil fields of the Middle East. By achieving this linkage of German forces, Hitler would gain control of much of the world's oil supply and at the same time cut off the Allies' oil

supply from Kuwait. Further, by securing control of the Don and Volga Rivers, as well as the Dnieper River, another major river flowing through southern Russia, he would starve the Soviet Union into submission and eliminate what he termed “the right arm of this international conspiracy of capitalism, plutocracy and Bolshevism” (Domarus, 2004, p. 2674). Hence, for the Soviets the battle for Stalingrad and the Caucasus region was a fight for the very survival of the Soviet Union (Hurd, 8/16/42, p. E4); for the Germans, it meant the possibility of achieving victory over the Soviet Union, destroying the Bolshevik state, gaining an unassailable strategic advantage over the Allies, and expanding the German Reich eastward as part of Hitler’s goal of achieving Lebensraum for the Germany and the people of Europe (*NY Times*, 9/6/42, p. E1).

German military planners placed great emphasis on the tank as their weapon of choice. The tank was well suited for the kind of warfare, known as Blitzkrieg, that relied on speed, mobility and concentration of fire power (*Blitzkrieg*, undated). As long as a tank formation was receiving adequate supplies of fuel and spare parts, it could operate effectively, especially in open terrain which allowed for maneuverability. The problem was keeping these formations supplied. German tanks were heavy and as a result required a substantial amount of fuel to operate. For instance, the Panzer III tank, weighing 20.3 tons and powered by a 12-cylinder, 265 hp engine, had a range of 103 miles on the road and 65 miles cross country; the huge Panzer VI Tiger Tank, weighing

a stupendous 55 tons and powered by a 694 hp engine, had a range of 60 miles on the road and 40 miles cross country. This meant that for a Panzer VI Tiger Tank to remain operational, it needed to be refueled every 40 to 60 miles, which, when operating deep inside enemy territory, could prove a daunting task (Sutherland, 2002, pp. 72, 76; German Heavy Tanks , 2005), and with supply lines that were being stretched ever further as German forces continued to advance, such a problem could place an entire army at risk, as became the case with the Sixth Army, with its tens of thousands of soldiers and hundreds of tanks, guns and aircraft, all which needed to be supplied.

In the summer of 1942, the German strength in Soviet Russia, which included the Stalingrad region, was 6.2 million men, including 810,000 Axis troops, 3,230 tanks and self-propelled guns, 56,000 guns and mortars and 3,400 aircraft. At Stalingrad were the 250,000 men of the German Sixth Army, along with 100 tanks, nearly 2,000 guns and 10,000 trucks (Hoyt, 1993, pp. 88, 191). By November 20, Soviet forces succeeded in surrounding the German Sixth Army, trapping them inside Stalingrad. Hitler ordered that the army hold its ground and refused to approve any plan calling for a breakout. Herman Goering, commander of the German air force (the Luftwaffe) had assured Hitler that the Sixth Army could be adequately supplied by air. German planners determined that the Sixth Army would need an absolute minimum of 300 tons a day which would necessitate making 150 fully loaded flights each day. However, the air force had too few planes available to make

the necessary number of flights and that, combined with the harsh weather conditions and having to fly over enemy territory, rendered any attempts at re-supplying the Sixth Army hopeless. The German Sixth Army was isolated; its fate sealed (Hayward, 1998, pp. 243, 247). In addition, the Germans had failed to detect the massive build up of Soviet forces occurring east of the Volga River (Glantz, 2008, p. 450). It was these forces that would eventually be used to envelop, trap and destroy the Sixth Army.

Inside Stalingrad itself, the fighting was intense, often at close quarters – street to street, factory to factory, building to building, sometimes even room to room. The entire city was destroyed; not a building was left intact. The prewar population of the city of 500,000 had shrunk to 1,500 (Hoyt, 1993, p. 284). Soviet forces stubbornly held on, withstanding the German onslaught. The intensity of fighting resulted in huge, mounting, unsustainable losses for German forces, losses that could not quickly be replaced. In fighting southwest of Stalingrad in September 1942, sixty German tanks were disabled in addition to the forty that were disabled in another sector where they had advanced (Associated Press, 9/14/42, p.1). In one day of fighting, October 14, 1942, the Germans lost up to 1,500 soldiers and officers and 40 tanks (Glantz, 2008, p. 385); during a two-day period, October 20-21, the Germans lost up to 7,000 soldiers and officers, 57 tanks, 100 guns, 70 machine guns and 26 aircraft (Glantz, 2008, p. 406); on November 13, the Germans "abandoned" the bodies of more than 1,000 soldiers and officers on the field of battle (Glantz, 2008, p. 457).

In conclusion, the evidence indicates that severe weather conditions, overstretched supply lines, unfavorable terrain, and a dubious scheme for cornering the world's oil reserves combined to doom the German Sixth Army to defeat and annihilation. What is surprising is not that the Sixth Army was defeated but that it held out for as long as it did. That is a testament to the tenaciousness of the German soldiers and the fanaticism of Adolf Hitler who refused to order a retreat and was willing to sacrifice his army rather than withdraw it to safety. A clearly thinking responsible military leader would have immediately acted to save his army, but Hitler was not such a person. For him the Sixth Army was a mere pawn in a game he was playing to achieve world domination, and he was willing to lose that pawn if he thought he could still win the game. The problem was that the game board was an actual battlefield and the pawns not mere chess pieces but actual people. Hitler thought in broad geographical terms but failed to take into consideration the fine details relating to climate and terrain, factors that no military planner could afford to ignore, especially when contemplating a military operation of epic proportions. That Hitler believed he could take on and defeat the combined forces of the British Empire, the Soviet Union and the United States, each one alone with access to resources far greater than anything Hitler could muster, reflected a mind that was entirely capable of devising plans and issuing orders that bore little connection to reality.

Such was the case with the decision to dispatch the Sixth Army to Stalingrad. For Hitler it was a gamble; for the German soldiers and the German people a disaster.

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