Geoffrey Roberts accounts for the Soviet victory in the greatest battle of the Second World War.

The site of the decisive battle of the Second World War was not the windswept sands of North Africa beloved of British war mythology nor the broad expanses of the Pacific favoured in the American version, but the snow-covered steppes of Southern Russia and the debris of a devastated city on the river Volga called Stalingrad. On 19 November 1942 the Red Army launched a massive counter-offensive at Stalingrad which encircled the German 6th army, destroyed the Axis armies defending the Germans' flanks, and ended forever Hitler's ambition to conquer Soviet Russia.

1942 was the year that the Axis tide of expansion in Europe, Asia and Africa was turned back. Among the highlights of this great turning point was the American destruction of the Japanese carrier force at Midway in June 1942 and the British victory at El Alamein in October. But compared with the German defeat at Stalingrad these were merely local events in the global war. During the battle of Stalingrad the Soviets suffered a million fatalities - more than the western Allies lost during the whole of the Second World War. The Stalingrad campaign cost Germany and its Axis partners 1.5 million casualties. When the Germans finally surrendered at Stalingrad 150,000 of their number lay dead in the ashes and rubble of the city, while another 250,000 had been taken prisoner.

Stalingrad was Hitler's last chance to win the war on the Eastern Front - by far the most important battleground of the Second World War. After Stalingrad there was no question but that the Soviet Union and its western allies would win the war.

**Barbarossa**

The origins of Hitler's ill-fated drive to Stalingrad in 1942 lay in the failure of Operation Barbarossa, of Germany's Blitzkrieg (lightning) invasion of Russia launched on 22 June 1941.

Between June and December 1941 the Germans drove deep into the Soviet Union, penetrating as far as the gates of Leningrad and Moscow. German panzer divisions smashed up the Red Army and, in huge encirclement operations, captured millions of Soviet soldiers. But Hitler failed to achieve his strategic objective of defeating Russia in the course of a single, short campaign. 'You only have to kick in the door and the whole rotten structure will come crashing down', he had said. Russian defences certainly proved to be fragile, but the communist system presided over by Stalin was more durable. Downplaying official communist ideology, the Soviets mobilised their resources and rallied the country to patriotic defence. This resistance was enough to halt the German advance in front of
Moscow in December 1941 and, crucially, buy the Soviets some time to prepare for the next round of the war.

After the failure of Operation Barbarossa Hitler faced a long war of attrition. To fight that war he needed control of Soviet economic resources in the Ukraine and in the Caucasus. Above all, he needed the oil fields of Baku, which lay on the other side of the Caucasus mountains. Capture of those fields would secure essential fuel supplies for the Germans as well as cripple the Soviet war economy.

The German summer campaign of 1942 was essentially a war for oil, with the strategic aim of taking Baku. Along the way the Germans would also seize Stalingrad. The city's strategic location on the Volga would enable the Germans to block oil supplies to northern Russia and would also provide protection from Soviet counter-attack.

The Onslaught

The German thrust south began in June 1942 and was, initially, a tremendous success. 'The Russian is finished', exclaimed a delighted Hitler as his armies advanced hundreds of kilometers toward Stalingrad and Baku.

By the end of August the Germans had reached Stalingrad and were poised to take the city by storm. The onslaught began with air raids that turned much of the city into a burning pyre and killed many thousands of civilians. Then German troops moved in and advanced through the city towards the Volga, aiming to take control of the river bank and to cut off supplies and reinforcements to the defending Soviets.

It had been a hard fight to reach Stalingrad, but the German 6th Army commanded by General Fredrich Paulus still expected to take the city quickly and relatively easily. The 100,000 strong German force deployed to take the city outnumbered their Soviet counterparts two to one in personnel and equipment. What the Germans did not expect was the ferocity and doggedness of the Soviet defence.

Defending Stalingrad was the 62nd Soviet Army led by General Vasilii Chuikov. Chuikov's men (and many women, too) defended from strongpoints in the shattered remnants of Stalingrad's buildings and factories. Inspired by Chuikov's leadership, the 62nd army deployed highly effective city fighting tactics. 'Every trench, every pill box, every rifle pit and every ruin turned into a stronghold', wrote Soviet writer Vasilii Grossman from Stalingrad, reporting on a battle 'fought not for individual buildings and shops, but for every step of a staircase, for a corner in some narrow corridor, for separate machine tools and for the passage-way between them'.

The Germans fought hard, too, but were demoralised by their failure to take the city quickly. Captured diaries of German soldiers referred to the Soviet defenders as not men but 'devils' who just would not give up, and to Stalingrad itself as a nightmare inferno of fire, smoke and explosions.

By November Paulus's 6th Army occupied 90 per cent of Stalingrad, but Chuikov's forces remained entrenched in a 16-mile strip adjacent to the river Volga. While the 62nd army held this position they could be resupplied from across river and continue to threaten the German position in the city.

In defending Stalingrad Chuikov's army incurred an incredible 75 per cent casualty rate. One division of 10,000 Soviet soldiers emerged from the battle with only 320 survivors. Throughout September and October the Germans attacked incessantly and the Soviet defence of the city was on a knife-edge. Even minor collapses of the defensive position threatened disaster and a dwindling of morale or a break in the will to resist could have
triggered the rapid disintegration of the Soviets' tenuous foothold in the city.

Explanations

Why did the Soviet defenders fight so hard and for so long in such difficult conditions? In recent years it has become fashionable to downplay the heroism of the Soviet defence of Stalingrad. Antony Beevor, for example, devotes many pages of his book to detailing Soviet coercion of their own troops. The impression is given that the main reason for the successful Soviet defence of the city was draconian discipline and force, not least the summary execution of many thousands of wavering Red army soldiers. Others argue that it was simple desperation and lack of alternatives that kept the Red Army fighting at Stalingrad.

Yet, while discipline and desperation played their part, it is difficult to believe that these were the major factors. In that case, the Germans would surely have won. No, the vital factor was the politics and psychology of patriotic defence against a murderous enemy. The German campaign in Russia was no ordinary war; it was a racist war of annihilation and destruction. In 1941-1942 millions of Soviet citizens perished at the hands of the Germans. Among the victims were 2 million Jews executed by the SS and 2 million Soviet POWs who died from maltreatment while in German captivity. By the end of the war the Soviet death toll had risen to 24 million, including 8 million military fatalities.

Quite simply, the vast majority of the Soviet defenders of Stalingrad saw themselves fighting not only for their own lives but for the very survival of their country and society.

The Stalin regime was brutal, authoritarian and ruthless, but it did organise a highly successful defence of Stalingrad - a feat very much against the military odds when the struggle began in summer 1942.

By mid-November the Germans were bogged down in Stalingrad, their push towards the Caucasus had stalled, and the Soviets were now ready to launch their counter-offensive. 'Operation Uranus' was one of series of Soviet counter-offensives, designed not only to turn the tables at Stalingrad but to collapse the German position along the entire Eastern Front. Astonishingly, Stalin's ambition was quickly to win the whole war, not just beat the Germans at Stalingrad.

The Red Army was not strong enough to deliver an immediately war-winning blow but the success of Operation Uranus did open the way for the Red Army's victorious march to Berlin in 1943-45.

The disaster at Stalingrad cost the Germans and their Axis allies some 50 divisions. These included 20 divisions of the elite 6th Army entombed in Stalingrad. The final surrender of Paulus and his men in January 1943 signalled not only the doom of the German campaign in Russia, but the beginning of the end for Hitler and the Nazi regime.

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• Nomonhan – The Unknown Victory (/philip-snow/nomonhan-%e2%80%93-unknown-victory)
• Nazi Posters in Wartime Russia (/john-erickson/nazi-posters-wartime-russia)
• Stalin as War Leader (/clive-pearson/stalin-war-leader)