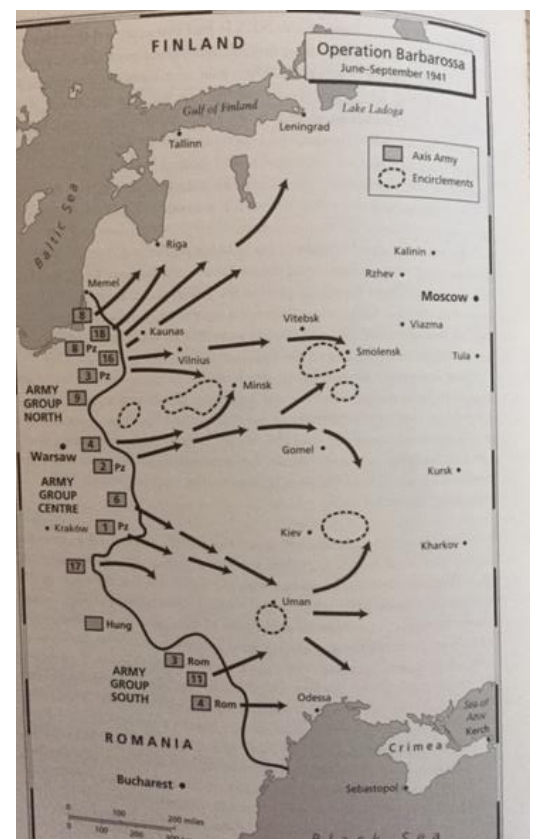


## What was the most significant turning point of World War II?

### *Operation Barbarossa: The Invasion of Russia*

- Hitler was supremely confident – ignoring Bismarck's warning against invading Russia, ignoring Napoleon's failed efforts in the 1800s, and ignoring the recognised danger of having a war on two fronts: 'we have only to kick in the door and the whole rotten edifice will come crashing down.'
- The primary objective was to secure the Soviet Union's oil and food, which Hitler believed would make him invincible.
- Under the 'Hunger Plan', the **Wehrmacht** (the German armed forces) would seize Soviet food production and kill 30 million people, mainly in the cities. Hitler also wanted more **Lebensraum**.
- On 6 June, the Wehrmacht issued the 'Commissar Order', meaning any **Communists** and male Jews were to be shot on the spot.
- Hitler began moving his troops East in early 1941. Stalin accepted Hitler's assurance that this was to put them out of range of British bombing, but Stalin did call up 800,000 reservists as a precaution. On 21 June, when Stalin was told of a German deserter, a Communist, who crossed the lines to warn of the attack, Stalin ordered him to be shot for disinformation.
- The **Red Army** (the Russian Army) was therefore caught almost completely unprepared on 22 June 1941. 1,800 Russian aircraft were destroyed on the first day of the attack; the **Luftwaffe** lost just 35 aircraft.
- All too often, Red Army officers deserted their men, fleeing in panic, and communications were in chaos. The German advances, in the perfect summer conditions, were formidable.
- Yet the Germans suffered 213,000 casualties by September 1941 and were now at risk of being unable to defend its supply lines. The prospect of fighting through a Russian winter was deeply troubling. The Eastern front was 2,500km long....



## *The Battle of Stalingrad*

After Hitler's 'Operation Barbarossa' failed to win a decisive victory over Russia, Hitler decided to launch a new offensive in Russia during **July 1942**. General Paulus, the commander of the 6th Army, was ordered to capture **Stalingrad**, a city that controlled the rail and waterway communications of southern Russia.



In the summer of 1942, Paulus advanced toward Stalingrad with 250,000 men, 500 tanks, 7,000 guns and mortars, and 25,000 horses. Progress was slow because **fuel was rationed**. At the end of July 1942, a lack of fuel brought Paulus to a halt. It was not until 7th August that he received the **supplies** needed to continue. The **Wehrmacht (the German armed forces) had become dangerously over-extended**. Over the next few weeks, his troops killed or captured 50,000 Soviet troops. Yet Paulus, on 18th August, now only thirty-five miles from Stalingrad, ran out of fuel again.

When fresh supplies reached him, Paulus decided to preserve fuel by moving forward with only his Panzer corps (*a Panzer division combined tanks, artillery, infantry, and anti-aircraft weapons; they were crucial to the success of Nazi blitzkrieg tactics*). The Red Army (the Russian army) now attacked this advance party, and they were brought to a halt just short of Stalingrad. Paulus circled the city and, while waiting for fuel, the Luftwaffe bombed the city, killing thousands of civilians.

Stalingrad was Stalin's city. It had been named after him as a result of his defence of the city during the Russian Civil War (1918-1920). **Stalin insisted that it should be held at all costs**. Hitler became obsessed with the capture of Stalingrad, wanting a symbolic victory. The city had great propaganda value. Stalin also knew that if Stalingrad was taken, the way would be open for **Moscow** to be attacked



from the east. If Moscow was cut off in this way, the defeat of the Soviet Union was virtually inevitable.

A million Soviet soldiers were drafted into the Stalingrad area. Most were untrained and had to be shown how to use a gun by their sergeants and officers. They were, however, supported by an increasing flow of tanks, aircraft and rocket batteries. General Zhukov, the Russian military leader who had yet to be defeated in a battle, was put in charge of the defence of Stalingrad. As the German Army advanced into the city, the Soviets fought for every building. The deeper the troops got into the city, the more difficult the street fighting became and casualties increased dramatically. **The German tanks were less effective in a fortified urban area** as it involved house-to-house fighting with rifles, pistols, machine-guns and hand grenades. Anti-tank guns were concealed in ruined houses and Soviet men fought at night with sub-machine guns, grenades, knives and even sharpened spades. They attacked through cellars and sewers. Sometimes, when Germans threw grenades at Red Army soldiers, the soldiers would throw those grenades right back, with the grenades exploding in the air. The Germans called this type of combat 'Rattenkrieg' – the war of rats.

Any Red Army soldiers, meanwhile, were to be shot if they tried to desert back by fleeing back across the river Volga. Many Soviet soldiers could not take the psychological strain of battle – 13,000 were executed for cowardice or desertion during the Stalingrad campaign. Those arrested were forced to strip before being shot, so that their uniforms could be reused without having discouraging bullet holes in them.

**The Germans had problems with the cleverly camouflaged artillery positions and machine-gun nests of the Russians.**

Uniforms on both sides were hard to distinguish because they became impregnated with dirt and dust. On most days the smoke and dust was so thick that the sun could not be seen. The Russians also made good use of **sniper** detachments deployed in the bombed out buildings in the city. On the 26th September, the German



Army was able to raise the **swastika** flag over the government buildings in Red Square, but street fighting continued. Hitler now ordered General Paulus to take Stalingrad, whatever the cost in casualties.

Meanwhile General Paulus, who had lost 40,000 soldiers since entering the city, was running out of fighting men. On 4th October, he made a desperate plea to Hitler for reinforcements. A few days later, five engineer battalions and a panzer division arrived in Stalingrad. Stalin responded by ordering three more armies to the city. Soviet losses were much higher than those of the Germans, but **Stalin had more men than Paulus...[Watch the DVD]**

The heavy rains of October turned the roads into seas of mud and the German Army's supply conveyors began to get bogged down. On 19th October, the rain turned to snow. Nevertheless, Paulus continued to make progress and, by the beginning of November, he controlled 90% of the city. However, his men were now running short of ammunition and food. Paulus was forced to retreat southward but when he reached Gumrak Airfield, Adolf Hitler ordered him to stop and stand fast, despite the danger of encirclement.

Senior officers under Paulus argued that the supplies the Germans needed could not be brought in as **the Russian winter** was so cold and so fierce. They argued that: "A breakout [of the encirclement] is our only chance." Paulus responded by saying that he had to obey Hitler's orders.

Throughout December, the Luftwaffe dropped an average of 70 tons of supplies a day. **The encircled German Army needed a minimum of 300 tons a day.** The soldiers were put on one-third rations and began to kill and eat their horses. By 7th December 1942, the 6th Army were living on one loaf of bread for every five men.

**The Soviets continued to harass the enemy, wearing them down to prevent them from getting any rest.** The 588<sup>th</sup> Night Bomber Regiment (right), for example, used old biplanes to fly low over the German lines, switching off their engines as they made their bombing run. The



ghostly swish of these aeroplanes made a sinister noise just before they released their bombs. These outstandingly brave pilots were all young women, in their late teens and early twenties. They were called 'Night Witches' by the Germans: by turning off their engines, all the Germans could hear of them was the wind noise, which the Germans likened to broomsticks. Many women flew over 800 missions by the end of the war.

Now aware that his army was in danger of being starved into surrender, Hitler ordered Field Marshal von Manstein and the 4th Panzer Army to launch a rescue attempt. Von Manstein managed to get within thirty miles of Stalingrad but was then brought to a halt by the Red Army. On 27th December 1942, Manstein decided to withdraw as he was also in danger of being encircled by Soviet troops.

In Stalingrad over 28,000 German soldiers had died in just over a month. With little food left, General Paulus gave the order that the 12,000 wounded men could no longer be fed. Only those who could fight would be given their rations. Von Manstein now gave the order for Paulus to make a mass breakout. Paulus rejected the order, arguing that his men were too weak to make such a move.

On 30th January, 1943, Adolf Hitler promoted Paulus to field marshal and sent him a message reminding him that no German field marshal had ever been captured. Hitler was clearly suggesting to Paulus to commit suicide but he declined and the following day surrendered to the Red Army. The last of the Germans surrendered on 2nd February.



The battle for Stalingrad was over. The battle had perhaps the greatest casualty figures of any single battle in the history of warfare (estimates are between 1,250,000 and 1,798,619). The German prisoners were force-marched to Siberia. About 45,000 died during the march to the prisoner of war camps and only about 7,000 survived the war.