

Russia and the Eastern Front

Although the original Barbarossa plan to knock out Russia in a gigantic three-pronged invasion had failed, Hitler still held confidently to the belief that the Wehrmacht could bring the war on the Eastern front to a victorious conclusion. With the onset of the “dry season” in the spring of 1942 new plans were drawn up for a south easterly thrust to the Volga and the Caucasus which would ultimately lead to Stalingrad. Two panzer armies under Von Paulus were directed to smash through to the Volga and capture the oilfields of the Caucasus. The long term view was to then swing north along the Volga and so take Moscow from the east. This plan was part of the grand strategy to coincide with Rommel’s triumphant career in North Africa.

On the 28th of June the offensive began. As with previous offensives the Blitzkrieg carried all before it. The Russians were outnumbered and outgunned, reeling back in a state of disorder. During this period the philosophy of the subhuman reached its peak with every report from the advancing armies stressing the racial inferiority of the enemy. Clearly this attitude was conceived to as a way of granting unrestricted licence to ill-treat and exploit their captives. Also, the Germans were not slow to use legal justification for their treatment of the Russian soldier since the Soviet Union was not a signatory of the Geneva Convention.

All through June and early July the offensive went brilliantly and Hitler enthused. However, by the first week of July flaws in the overall plan became clear. Von Paulus was rebuffed in his attempts to secure river crossings across the Volga and was forced to await additional panzer support to be brought up from the south. The first serious attempt to batter through the 80 mile long front defending Stalingrad did not begin until August 19th. The first attacks did not prosper. Many German soldiers believing that the war was virtually over were reluctant to over expose themselves unnecessarily in what they considered the last engagement.

However, by August 23rd a very narrow breach had been made in the Russian lines and it seemed that Stalingrad was within reach. But this was not the case, in the coming weeks it became clear that the Russians were determined to fight in front of and if necessary in Stalingrad itself. Von Paulus concentrated his forces against the southern half of the city where the ground was more open and the buildings less substantial. Eventually on September 14th there was a breakthrough and many German commanders assumed that the fate of the city was sealed.

Hitler now ordered all other forces to take the defensive except for those in Stalingrad. In the meantime the Russians were quietly planning a large scale

relief operation to be carried out on the whole 250 mile front. This began on November 19th and very quickly the onrush of Soviet troops linked up around the 22 German divisions attacking the city. By November 24th the encirclement was complete. Although there were attempts to relieve the trapped German Armies these came to nothing and 330,000 men faced the prospect of annihilation unless they could break out to their own lines in the west. By now winter had set in and supply by air to the encircled troops became increasingly difficult as the weather conditions worsened. Despite repeated attempts at relief throughout December more and more and more Soviet units moved in and so began the final act. By the end of January Von Paulus' men had been split in two and all resistance ended on February 2nd. Following this historic defeat, Hitler gave permission for limited tactical retreat while the shattered troops regrouped and prepared for a counterstroke and their next offensive on the eastern front.

By the spring of 1943 there had been a radical tactical change on the eastern front. Soviet attacks had expelled the Germans from territory gained in 1942 and at once raised the issue of how far in the east the German campaign should be carried on. The hope was that a further success and Stalin's ongoing dissatisfaction with the lack of a western front would cause the Alliance to disintegrate. The eastern front at this point was dominated by the huge Kursk salient bulging westwards and German planning envisaged a pincer on a massive scale to pinch it out. This was to be the largest German attack mounted so far in the east. Great hopes were placed on new equipment, particularly in the new tanks whose production had significantly increased in the spring and summer of 1943. Also in aircraft particularly the Focke-Wolf 190A fighter which was just coming into service. By July 5th operation Citadel was ready and some 2,700 tanks spearheaded by the new Tigers and Ferdinands began to move forward on the Kursk salient. As before, the Germans were able to push forward nearly six miles with considerable losses of men and tanks before determined resistance brings the offensive to a halt. The Russians then mount a counteroffensive and on July 12th the greatest tank battle in history begins. German losses are huge, 550 tanks and 35,000 men are lost. Eventually in early August fearing encirclement the German High Command is forced to withdraw towards the west.

While the great battles were raging further north and the German Army was being bled to death at Stalingrad another Soviet army was fighting to prevent the Germans from reaching the main oilfields of the Caucasus. As the Germans fell back from Stalingrad, so their forces in the Caucasus were also drawn back and Hitler's dream of an advance into the oil rich near and Middle East faded away. A continuous Russian offensive lasting over five months in the summer

of 1943 saw Soviet troops effectively wear out their attackers and move from the defensive to the offensive ultimately liberating the whole region by November.

The Red Army was now poised to begin a massive offensive across the whole front. The main weight fell on the central and southern sectors driving through the Ukraine and on towards the Dnieper River. The Russians by now had mastered the logistical problems of supplying their armies during large scale advances and maintaining the momentum necessary to keep the Germans permanently off balance. In the north, the German troops which had been besieging Leningrad during 1942 and early 1943 came under increasing pressure from the Soviet Armies as they moved further westward and gradually a breakthrough was achieved.

The success of its operations during the late summer and autumn of 1943 now saw the Russians driving full tilt towards the west and gathering strength as they did so. The Red Army's summer campaign of 1944 was part of a great offensive which ranged from the Baltic States to the Balkans. The Red Army had a clear superiority in every department and made good use of it to keep the Germans permanently off balance. By the end of 1944, the Russians had been able to use this advantage to clear all their own territory but supply problems and dogged German resistance eventually brought the advance to a halt. Meanwhile as the Red Army approached the Vistula River and the Polish border the Warsaw Home Army rose to challenge the occupation forces. They had expected to receive immediate help from the Allies but sadly this did not come and as the world watched in horror the Germans ruthlessly crushed the uprising and raised Warsaw to the ground.

Disaster now followed disaster for the Germans on all fronts. In the Balkans their troops were reduced to little more than a stiffening force for the faltering allies of Germany. Rumania surrendered in early September and the Russians drove on towards Belgrade eventually cutting off the German southern army group in Greece. By November the Germans found themselves defending a line along the Danube. In January 1945 the brief lull on the Eastern Front was shattered as the Red Army broke out from its bridgeheads on the Vistula and surged westwards towards the frontiers of the Reich itself. In a month long offensive, Russian forces liberated the remainder of Poland and a large part of Czechoslovakia finally reaching the Oder in early February. The German nightmare had now come true; the Bolshevik Horde had now arrived on German soil.

Towards the end of March the Russian Army had established a bridgehead across the River Oder only 30 miles from Berlin while the Allied forces moving eastwards were still 275 miles away. At this point, since it was obvious that the

Russians could take Berlin whenever they wished a decision was taken by the Allied command to halt the advance on the western front on the River Elbe. Eventually on April 16th the long awaited Russian attack on Berlin began and within a few days shells were falling on the Chancellery Gardens and Hitler's bunker. By April 25th the city was surrounded. On the same day forward patrols of General Konev's Guards division met units of the US 1st Army at Torgau on the River Elbe. As reports and photographs of the event became public a wave of relief swept through the hearts of the outside world.