

WHAT WAS THE TURNING POINT OF WORLD WAR II?

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History 420: Senior Seminar
December 13, 2012

World War II was the decisive war of the twentieth century. Millions of people lost their lives in the fighting. Hitler and the Nazis were eventually stopped in their attempt to dominate Europe, but at a great cost to everyone. Looking back at the war, it is hard to find the definitive moment when the war could no longer be won by the Axis, and it is even more difficult to find the exact moment when the tide of the war turned. This is because there are so many moments that could be argued as the turning point of World War II. Different historians pose different arguments as to what this moment could be.

Most agree that the turning point of World War II, in military terms, was either Operation Barbarossa or the Battle of Stalingrad. UCLA professor Robert Dallek, Third Reich and World War II specialist Richard Overy, and British journalist and historian Max Hastings, all argue that Stalingrad was the point of the war in which everything changed.¹ The principal arguments surrounding this specific battle are that it was the furthest east that Germany ever made it, and after the Russian victory Stalin's forces were able to gain the confidence and momentum necessary to push the Germans back to the border. On the other hand, Operation Barbarossa is often cited as the turning point for World War II because the Germans did not have the resources necessary to survive a prolonged invasion of Russia fighting both the Red Army and the harsh Russian weather.

¹ Laurence Rees, "What Was the Turning Point of World War II?" *World War II* 25 (2010): 30-32.

Adam Tooze, a modern German historian and professor at Yale, argues that the swift German victory in France was the point after which the early victors could no longer win the war. Tooze continued to argue that victory in France was not predestined, and that Germany was in fact very lucky to emerge victorious. This unlikely victory gave Germany a false confidence in its abilities to invade and conquer Russia, and also contributed to the initial relaxed demeanor of the German generals at the beginning of the invasion of Russia.² While Tooze's point of view is certainly a unique argument for the turning point of the war, it falsely assumes that the Germans were under the impression they were going to defeat the French. Hitler was heavily advised against an invasion in the West by his staff and generals. And while the invasion was pushed back later than Hitler had originally planned, his staff still knew they were very lucky to have emerged victorious. Therefore, the argument centered on false confidence cannot be true because the Wehrmacht's leadership would have understood that the result could have been very different very easily. Therefore, they gained no false-confidence in the victory.

Although I strongly disagree with Tooze and his opinion on the turning point, I believe Dallek and Hastings make a good point. The Battle of Stalingrad was indeed a monumental shift in momentum in the fighting, but it does not tell the whole story. The reason that the Third Reich fell short of victory was a combination of the defeat at

² Rees, 29.

the Battle of Stalingrad and the fact that Hitler was Germany's leader. Hitler possessed very poor military judgment, and the decisions he made through the course of the war proved to be disastrous for Germany.

Hitler and his Generals

Hitler was a very hard man for his generals to follow. He was stubborn and wanted everything to go his way. He refused to listen to the advice given to him and was constantly doubting his generals. Hitler Directs his War, a compilation of transcripts of meetings between Hitler and his staff edited by Felix Gilbert, demonstrates this poor leadership. On December 12, 1942, Hitler met with Nazi officials Bodenschatz, Buhle, Christian, Heusinger, Hewel, Jodl, Krancke, Warlimont, and Zeitzler to discuss the fighting in the African theater.³ Hitler is asking about Rommel's retreat from the position near El Aghelia, and begins to question the nerves of Rommel, asking whether it was wise leaving him in command in Africa. Rommel ordered the retreat because the British were preparing to attack from the front and also by a flanking maneuver around the South. Hitler, who was not involved in the decision and was not as informed on the situation as Rommel was, queried Rommel's decision. Jodl disagreed with Hitler and came to Rommel's defense. He stated that Rommel was extremely undersupplied, and then said that asking Rommel to defeat the British was "like asking a man who has been nourished on a little bread and milk to participate in

³ Felix Gilbert, *Hitler Directs His War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951), 9.

the Olympics.”⁴ Hitler doubted his general, when really he should have understood the circumstances that led to Rommel’s retreat, and this also led to direct conflict with his staff.

Another case of Hitler doubting his generals came with General Paulus’ surrender at Stalingrad. The fighting in the city, which lasted almost seven months, was only ended after the Russian Army successfully surrounded the German Sixth Army and cut off any hopes of escape or resupply. Upon hearing that Paulus had surrendered and the Russians had taken thousands of German prisoners, Hitler questioned why General Paulus was still alive. Hitler thought it was cowardly and dishonorable that Paulus did not take his own life. Hitler said, “The heroism of so many tens of thousands of men, officers, and generals is nullified by such a man who lacks the character to do in a minute what a weak woman has done.”⁵ The “weak woman” refers to a story Hitler told earlier in the meeting about a woman who was no longer needed, and wrote Hitler asking him to take care of her children and she then shot herself. While there are doubts as to whether the story is completely true, the analogy is not lost.

In a larger context, however, Hitler’s leadership directly led to the capture of General Paulus and the Sixth Army. Before the Germany army was completely surrounded Paulus had made several requests to retreat from the city. Instead of

⁴ Gilbert, 13.

⁵ Gilbert, 21.

allowing the army attempt an escape, Hitler insisted on a plan in which the *Luftwaffe* would air-drop supplies to the army while a freshly-created army lead by General Erich von Manstein would attempt to break through the Russians and reach the Sixth Army.⁶ Had Hitler allowed Paulus to simply retreat and regroup, the fighting in Russia could have ended very differently. But Hitler had trouble letting go of something once he had his hands on it, and this stubbornness was apparent at Stalingrad. He refused to allow his troops to retreat because he wanted Stalingrad so badly. Ultimately it cost him thousands of troops in the surrender.

If Hitler had been more sympathetic to what his generals were going through he could have been a more effective military leader. He could have worked directly with the generals to find alternative solutions to a problem, or figure out another way an attack or troop movement could be even more effective. But he was too stubborn to do this. Field Marshal Erich von Manstein shows in his memoir exactly how Hitler's subordinates felt about his leadership. Manstein believed that Hitler wanted to be the next Napoleon and would only tolerate men underneath him who would follow all orders obediently without question. He also noted that Hitler greatly lacked Napoleon's military training and his military genius.⁷

⁶ Bill Barry, "Stopped Cold: How Hitler's Stubborn Decision to Resupply Snowbound Troops by Air Doomed the Sixth Army and Ultimately Cost Germany the War" *World War II* 21(2007): 37.

⁷ Erich von Manstein, *Lost Victories* (Minneapolis: Zenith Press, 1982), 283.

Manstein was constantly critical of Hitler's lack of military experience, specifically his lack of strategy and grand tactics. Hitler seemed to think of himself as sufficiently trained in the military due to his experience fighting in World War I. When discussing ammunition supplies to the front towards the end of the war, when supplies were greatly restricted, Hitler often stated how during the First World War his unit was allowed to fire only a few rounds per day and used that as justification for limiting ammunition during World War II.⁸ However, these were two very different conflicts with very different battle methods, and Hitler was using out-of-date tactics to dictate a situation he did not fully understand. Manstein said that Hitler gave off the impression that he thought he could do a better job commanding the war from his desk than the commanders who were at the fronts.⁹

Hitler also was very suspicious and distrustful of his generals, and therefore greatly limited their freedom of action. Hitler wanted to have the final say in all major decisions, and this was not only fatal to the Germans because Hitler did not really know what he was doing, but it also slowed everything down to a point that Hitler was working with out-of-date information. By the time the situation had been relayed to Hitler and he made a decision the situation could have changed to the point that Hitler's orders were no longer possible. Hitler was also notorious at taking an unprecedented amount of time to make any sort of decision. Hitler's Chief-of-Staff,

⁸ Gilbert, 117.

⁹ Manstein, 284.

General Zeitzler, would frequently have to request decisions from Hitler for days during evening conferences. It got to the point where Zeitzler would ask what “round” he was on with Hitler when he was trying to get him to make a decision.¹⁰ Hitler’s indecisiveness became a running joke and a game with his generals.

Hitler and his generals constantly clashed on decisions. For example, Hitler wanted to invade France and have it completely conquered before the winter of 1939. His generals, on the other hand, were much more conservative in their approach to military offensives after the invasion of Poland. As Hitler was pushing for an early invasion of France, his generals and staff were compiling reasons against such an invasion, especially as early as autumn of 1939. General Warlimont assembled a list of facts that showed Germany was only capable economically of defending her borders, not expanding them.

Hitler’s generals were afraid that the German army was not strong enough to defeat the French, and feared that invading would draw the full strength of the English into the war. These generals were men who had experience both commanding and fighting in the First World War, and they remember the British as being very tenacious opponents that they were not eager to fight again. However, Hitler was afraid that not attacking in the West would allow those enemies to strengthen and fortify their

¹⁰ Manstein, 286.

positions, effectively becoming a much more difficult enemy to conquer later.¹¹ Hitler used his reasoning to override any advice given to him by his generals, and continually pushed for an invasion that no one else thought was possible.

General Heinrich von Stülpnagel, the Deputy Chief-of-Staff of the Army, drew up a document showing that an offensive war against France was impossible.¹² In a report given directly to Hitler, Field Marshal von Brauchitsch, originally optimistic about an offensive in the West, altered his opinion and stated that it was impractical because the German infantry who invaded Poland lacked the aggressive spirit of that portrayed by the Germans in the First World War. This offended Hitler to the point he interrupted Brauchitsch and refused to allow him to continue to argue his point.¹³

The suspicion Hitler bestowed on his staff was something that constantly hindered German war efforts. Against the advice of Germany's top generals, Hitler tried to order the invasion of France in 1939, but bad weather restricted the initial attempts to move troops. Hitler was unconvinced that the weather was to blame for the delays, and instead believed that it was betrayal by the generals who opposed the invasion. During these delays Hitler was finally convinced not to invade so early.¹⁴ By not allowing his generals to freely give him advice, Hitler was effectively restricting what the German Army could accomplish. Instead of listening to the men who had

¹¹ B.H. Liddell Hart, *The German Generals Talk* (New York: William Morrow & CO., 1948), 109.

¹² Milton Shulman, *Defeat in the West* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, INC., 1948), 36.

¹³ Shulman, 37.

¹⁴ Shulman, 38.

much more experience commanding a large army he insisted on doing whatever he wanted.

Hitler as a Military Leader

When Hitler wanted something, he tried to make it happen as soon as possible. But whenever he was unsure of the decision, or didn't like the necessary choice, Hitler would procrastinate on issuing an order. This was one area that Field Marshal Manstein was extremely critical of Hitler. Manstein also doubted Hitler's lack of risk-taking as a leader. Manstein believed that one of the reasons Hitler decided to invade Russia was because he felt it was safer than trying to invade Britain. And the Field Marshal gave three reasons as to why he thought Hitler was so terrified of risk. The first was that Hitler secretly knew he lacked the military ability to command an army through such a difficult task. By avoiding the larger and harsher battles, Hitler could avoid revealing his incompetence commanding. The second reason was that Hitler was scared the people's reverence for Hitler would be shaken if he suffered a setback, which Manstein said was almost a self-fulfilling prophecy and by playing it safe all the time Hitler actually suffered more setbacks. And the final reason was Hitler's detestation of giving up anything once he had his hands on it, and by taking a risk he was prone to losing.¹⁵ Once the Germans had taken control of anything, Hitler would be unwilling to risk losing it, and was unwilling to sacrifice a smaller objective to obtain a larger one.

¹⁵ Manstein, 277-78.

With these three reasons all combined, yielded a leader who refused to take any risks in the war.

Hitler has been shown to be a very poor military leader in numerous ways. One more reason that he was unsuccessful in commanding the German army is because he was extremely distrustful and critical of any allied units. He doubted reports given to him from the Japanese because he felt that he was unable to trust a single word they told him.¹⁶ He refused to give the Italians credit for anything they did because he felt that the Germans were solely responsible for the war effort. He was quoted saying, "With seven divisions we're running the war alone anyway. They're not running it. From the point of view of supplies, it is our show, although they do handle the crossing; but there again, we have contributed the shipping space..."¹⁷ Even when there is an area of the war effort to which the Italians are contributing greatly, he takes that away from them by claiming it wouldn't have been possible without previous German involvement.

Even men who had turned their back on their own country to fight for Germany were not safe from Hitler's criticism. A division of Russian men who were strongly anti-Communism and fought alongside the Nazis, led by a Russian named Andrey Vlassov, were supplied by the German army. However, in the early weeks of 1945, Hitler said "Every wretch is put into a German uniform. I have always been opposed to

¹⁶ Gilbert, 23.

¹⁷ Gilbert, 5.

it.”¹⁸ The mere fact that these men had been supplied German uniforms angered Hitler, because he felt as though these men were not worthy of wearing it. The same men who had joined Germany to fight against their home nation were viewed with contempt by Hitler. He had no appreciation or respect for his allies.

Hitler was even comfortable with stripping trained allied units of their weapons and supplies in order to field a new, untrained, German unit. Again speaking of the Vlassov Division, Hitler called it idiocy to equip a division of 10,000 or 11,000 Russian men when he could strip them of their weapons and raise a German division. He then proceeded to call the Indian Legion a joke filled with men who “can’t kill a louse, who’d rather let themselves be eaten up.”¹⁹ This extreme cynicism towards his allies was something that steered Hitler towards defeat. A military leader needs to be able to trust allied units to do their job, and because Hitler was unable to do so he was constantly stretching the German Army’s capacity to handle jobs allied units could have done.

Hitler was always moving his troops around, but often without the knowledge of his staff. He had a habit of issuing whatever order he thought was best, often without advice from his generals. The Chief-of-Staff of the German Army had no final say in the overall distribution of the army’s forces, and often was unaware where troops and materials were being sent.²⁰ Hitler’s orders for the troops were often counter-

¹⁸ Gilbert, 111.

¹⁹ Gilbert, 148.

²⁰ Manstein, 283.

productive. He was notorious for not fully anticipating enemy intentions and movements because he felt that the Germans were superior enough to always triumph in battle. He also had a difficult time accepting any field reports that showed the enemy to have a stronger force than the Germans. Often, these reports were disregarded and Hitler would order troops to places where they were greatly outnumbered or placed in a severely disadvantageous position.²¹

Neglect of enemy movements and strength led to another mistake Hitler consistently made. Manstein noted that Hitler had a very difficult time grasping the idea that an army can never be too strong at a critical point, and very often would send troops away from these strongholds, or at the very least refuse to reinforce them. Then when the Russians would attack these points, there was no possible way the Germans could defend against the stronger enemy, and were forced to retreat. This domino effect continued, because since Hitler was unwilling to lose the critical point he would send more troops to reinforce the retreating Germans. In a military engagement, it is much more difficult to halt an advancing enemy with retreating troops than it is to initially stop them. This meant that Hitler was forced to send several times the troops that would have been initially necessary to stop the Russians.²²

Individual troops meant nothing to Hitler, so losing them only meant he had a smaller force to work with. But he had no qualms sacrificing men to accomplish a task,

²¹ Mansterin, 277.

²² Manstein, 278.

no matter how small or insignificant it was. The power of force was the only thing that mattered to the man. Hitler believed that the bigger force would always win, or as Manstein put it, the power of force was placed over the power of the mind.²³ Hitler was obsessed with the armament production figures for the troops, because he thought that being better supplied meant his army would be the greater force on the battlefield. Hitler was always ordering the arms industry to produce more weapons for the always-expanding German army. In 1940 the German Army alone was compiled of 180 different divisions.²⁴ This rapid growth created numerous problems. The German industry was not used to manufacturing at such a high production rate, and the individuals who had been trained in the manufacturing were also not used to this. The high demand created a strain on the industry that continued through the war.

Operation Barbarossa

Hitler was considered a detrimental military commander to the Third Reich. The decisions he made were often arrogant, ignorant, and ill-advised. Hitler did not trust his generals, even the ones who had proved themselves in battle before, and as a result ended up making many decisions that not only lost the lives of many soldiers, but lost entire battles or military objectives as well. This may have been the case with the Battle of Stalingrad. However, for the time being, I pose a different question. Was the Battle of

²³ Manstein, 280.

²⁴ Horst Boog, *et al.*, *Germany and the Second World War: Volume IV*, ed. Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, trans. Dean S. McMurry (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 28-29.

Stalingrad the decisive battle in World War II, after which the momentum and shifted and the Axis no longer stood a chance at victory?

Many different events might be seen as the decisive battle. Moments in the war ranging from German victory in France, to the month of December in 1941, or to Operation Barbarossa, have all been argued as the one pivotal moment in the war. However, the Battle of Stalingrad is the event that most historians choose to believe was the vital moment in which the tide turned. It is the safe answer, and it is the unexciting answer, but this essay holds fast that it is also the correct answer.

Before the Battle of Stalingrad could take place, Hitler first had to make the monumental mistake of invading Russia. In order to do this, the truce between the two nations had to be broken and war needed to be declared. On the June 22, 1941, a telegram that was sent from Berlin arrived to the ambassador in Russia, carrying the message of war. In it, the reasons were laid out as to why Germany was justified in breaking the non-aggression pact that had been signed with Russia. The telegram states the Soviet Government had continued and intensified attempts to undermine Germany, had adopted a more and more anti-German foreign policy, and had concentrated all of its forces on the German border.²⁵ While all three of these claims were largely exaggerated and overextended the truth, Germany felt they would suffice as reasoning

²⁵ Ronald Seth, *Stalingrad: Point of Return* (London: Richard Clay and Company, Ltd., 1959), 16.

for a declaration of war. Hours before the telegram was to be delivered to Soviet officials, the Wehrmacht had crossed the Russian border.

The strategy of Operation Barbarossa divided the invasion force into three sub-groups, each with its own objectives. The north group, which was commanded by von Leeb, consisted of twenty-nine different divisions with the final objective of taking Leningrad. The central group, led by Field Marshal von Bock, was the strongest of the three groups and was tasked with taking Moscow. And the south group, commanded by Field Marshal von Rundstedt, was to take the resource-rich industrial area of the Donetz basin, as well as the ports to the Black Sea.²⁶ The invading forces spread out across most of the Russian border, and crossed in simultaneously.

The main problem with an invasion force so large and so spread out was supplying the troops. This support was made more difficult because in the first few weeks of the invasion the forces moved at an unheard-of pace. The northern and central groups both came within miles of their objectives, but neither force expected much resistance. The heavy fighting the Germans experienced throughout Russia consumed more supplies than had been anticipated. Hitler had been optimistic that all three invading groups would have captured their objectives before the winter of 1941. In fact, he had been so adamant about this that he refused to plan for fighting in the harsh Russian winter. Hitler even went as far as to forbid the discussion of Russian

²⁶ Seth, 18-19.

winters during meetings.²⁷ He had expected the Russian civilians to provide clothing and shelter to the Germans as they moved through. Stalin's scorched earth policy prevented this, as the Red Army destroyed anything that could have been of use to the enemy during their initial retreats. In addition to the scorched earth policy, the Russian civilians were not as welcoming of the German invaders as Hitler had anticipated. Of course, since none of the groups had succeeded in taking their objectives and there were no winter supplies, the entire German army suffered greatly during one of the most brutal winters of the century.

The Germans were so damaged by the harsh winter months that Hitler was forced to abandon his offensive and order a retreat. The Germans had failed to capture Leningrad, failed to capture the Soviet capital of Moscow, and failed to capture the industrial southern sector. As the Germans retreated, however, the Russians experienced the same supply problems the Germans had. The further they pushed the Germans back, the more strained their supply lines became and the longer it took for new provisions to reach the troops. The Germans, meanwhile, were falling back onto their own supplies, which meant that they were being resupplied at a much quicker rate than the Russians. The eventual result was that both Germans and Russians came to a halt, waiting for the next move.

²⁷ Antony Beevor, *Stalingrad: The Fateful Siege*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 33.

Now Germany clearly could not supply a front the entire length of Russia. This left Hitler with two main options. One, he could attack Moscow and again attempt to take it from the Russians. This would have huge military repercussions for the Soviets, and some of Hitler's advisors believed that taking Moscow would eventually cause a weakening in the Red Army to the point that it broke, and Germany would have conquered Russia. The other option was to head south, towards the Caucasus, in search of crucial oil. While this move would weaken Russia's economic power, it would also turn the fighting in Russia into a war of attrition. And as Ronald Seth pointed out, in order to win a war of attrition one party must begin in a more powerful economic position than its enemy, and Germany was not economically more powerful than the Russians.²⁸

In typical fashion, Hitler ignored his advisors and decided move towards the Caucasus. He was worried that attacking Moscow would leave the army susceptible to flanking maneuvers by the Red Army, but also did not believe that a war of attrition would be certain by moving south. Once the decision was made to try to take the oil fields, it became obvious that Stalingrad was going to become a critical point in the war due to the strategic location along the rivers.²⁹

²⁸ Seth, 29-30.

²⁹ Seth, 31.

Stalingrad

After regrouping from a failed Operation Barbarossa, Hitler and his generals launched their new offensive, Fall Blau. The part of this offensive which focused on the German attack toward Stalingrad and the Caucasus region was Operation Braunschweig. This operation involved sending the Sixth Army and the Fourth Panzer Divisions down and across the Don River, and then east to Stalingrad. Meanwhile, the Seventeenth Army and the First Panzer Division would move farther south, towards the Caucasus.³⁰ Hitler was so impatient in taking the Caucasus that he split up his fighting force. A more strategic move would have been to use the entire force to take the city of Stalingrad, then move down and take the Caucasus. This would have protected the Russians from flanking the Wehrmacht, but would not have weakened his army.

While the decision to split the army weakened the fighting power of the troops, it did not initially weaken morale. Some had their doubts, such as the company commander of the 384th Infantry Division. In a diary he kept, the commander wrote that he feared Germany simply did not have enough troops and sensed that this battle would bring about a dramatic shift in momentum of the war that there would be no stopping.³¹ However, the majority of the soldiers did not worry. After the initial attack on the city went successfully, soldiers wrote home saying that the city would be taken

³⁰ Beevor, 64.

³¹ Beevor, 100-01.

over in just a couple of days, and officers were telling their men that the city would certainly fall.³² What the Germans did not account for was the ferocity with which the civilians of Stalingrad would fight and defend their city.

The Germans fought because it was what they were told to do, or because they wanted to fight for some political ideology or for revenge from the First World War. The civilians in Stalingrad fought because the very soil of their Holy Russia had been “desecrated by alien foot, who trod it not in peace but in enmity.”³³ They were fighting to defend their home, which is a powerful entity to fight for. Together, all the civilians pitched in and dug an anti-tank trench twenty-five miles long. The trench itself was fifteen feet deep and twelve feet wide, and it was dug in a matter of weeks. The tractor factory in the city, which had switched to producing tanks at the beginning of the war, was producing as many tanks as possible. When the workers weren’t building the tanks, they were learning to use the gun and drive the tank in order to help defend the city.³⁴ The school children built earth-mounds around oil tanks to try to protect them from falling bombs, and even the girls fresh out of high school learned to man the anti-aircraft weapons located around the city.³⁵ Every citizen did whatever he or she could to help defend their city. Unfortunately, the civilians were not given priority to escape, with shipments of supplies and soldiers taking precedence. Eventually Stalin refused to

³² Beevor, 119.

³³ Seth, 33.

³⁴ Seth, 59-63.

³⁵ Beevor, 107.

allow the civilians to leave the city. He believed it would push the soldiers defending the city to fight harder. The initial bombings of the city left an estimated 40,000 civilians dead.³⁶

The bombs dropped by the *Luftwaffe* over the city not only killed tens of thousands of civilians, it leveled much of Stalingrad. The rubble created by the destroyed buildings ended up making the fighting much more intense and vicious. For example, in the factory area in the north end, the rubble there was so dense that the Russians could hide, undetected, and attack the Germans practically unseen. Even being able to see the enemy did not make the fighting any less ruthless. A Russian soldier gave his firsthand account of the close-quarters fighting that was experienced in much of Stalingrad:

There was a sudden collision of bodies – our people and the enemy, re-emerging from the cellar where they had taken shelter. Fist fighting started immediately. To the left of me, Afanasiev knocked out a guy, then another German jumped on him. I turned to help, but one of the enemy threw himself on me first. It was a chaotic swirl of bodies and shouting. I felt hands on my wind-pipe and struggled to breathe, but my instinct for self-preservation took over: I found the strength to draw my knife and bring it down hard on my attacker's back.³⁷

The Germans entered the Battle of Stalingrad not expecting any resistance, especially on the ferocious level described by the Russian soldier. German morale was not nearly as strong as that of the Russians. The Germans expected to be out of the city in a week,

³⁶ Beevor, 106.

³⁷ Michael K. Jones, *Stalingrad: How the Red Army Survived the German Onslaught*, (Philadelphia: Casemate, 2007), 147.

and ended up fighting over single houses for months. Russian troops, on the other hand, were thrilled they could "...make the enemy's blood flow for the blood of our wives, children, soldiers, and officers."³⁸ The Russians were getting the revenge they had been longing for.

The Russians used these small victories, as well as their unfaltering devotion to drive back the Germans, to win back the city little by little. Famous Soviet sniper Vassili Zaitsev summed up the Soviet troops' feelings when he wrote, "There was no ground for us beyond the Volga",³⁹ the river against which Stalingrad bordered. These Russian troops they would rather die than cross the river and give up their city.

Small victories helped boost moral during the fighting, and it often temporarily resulted in a gained apartment building or house within the city, but the real blow to the Germans came on the November 19, 1942. This was the day the Russian counter-offensive, codenamed Operation Uranus, was launched. Within two days the Russians had moved in from the north and up from the south to trap the German Sixth Army, leaving it surrounded.⁴⁰ Without orders from Hitler to attempt a breakout, there was nothing the Germans could do but defend themselves the best they could.

³⁸ Beevor, 249.

³⁹ Vassili Zaitsev, *Notes of a Russian Snipersm* (Pennsylvania: Frontline Books, 2010).

⁴⁰ Jones, *Stalingrad: How the Red Army Survived the German Onslaught*, 241.

The Air-Bridge

Hitler was obsessed with Stalingrad. The city itself was of no practical use, it was too destroyed to yield anything productive to either side anymore. But the city was named after Russia's leader, and there was a large symbolic victory in taking that from the Russians. This obsession blinded Hitler and caused him to make decisions and give orders that proved to be more damaging than rewarding to the German war effort.

The leader of the Sixth Army, Friedrich Paulus, had requested permission from Hitler to attempt to break out of the surrounding Russians and regroup. While the exact number is unknown, there were approximately 220,000 German troops surrounded by the Russians.⁴¹ Hitler felt this number should be a more than strong enough fighting force to hold out. Based on very lucky early German success, Hitler developed the belief that all encircled troops should be able to hang on, no matter what.⁴² The Sixth Army did not have the supplies necessary to successfully maintain against a larger surrounding Russian force.

Paulus again requested permission to attempt a break out, and Hitler was almost convinced to allow him to try. But then Reichsmarschall Göring talked with Hitler and guaranteed him that the *Luftwaffe* would be able to fully supply the Sixth Army if they

⁴¹ Seth, 197.

⁴² Beevor, 44.

would hold the air fields.⁴³ Hitler believed Göring, and Paulus was again denied the permission to break out. As Hitler tended to do, the only way he measured the success of this new plan was by numbers. In an attempt to please Hitler, the *Luftwaffe* used plans that were unreliable so they could say that had more planes than they actually did, and even considered using gliders to deliver goods. The glider idea was scratched once it was brought up how easily they could be shot down.⁴⁴

Even the pilots who were tasked with this knew it was a lost cause. Lieutenant General Wolfgang Pickert, an officer in the *Luftwaffe*, said in a personal interview with Milton Shulman, that “It was my task to attempt to supply the Sixth German Army by air, but our resources were far too inadequate....”⁴⁵ However, the commanding officers were less concerned about supplying the Sixth Army with the supplies needed to fight than with pleasing Hitler. Not until Paulus sent Captain Winrich Behr to meet directly with Hitler, did Hitler hear about how ineffective the “air-bridge” was. Behr was careful to not insult the *Luftwaffe* directly, but also let Hitler know that most of the drops were either useless in what they contained or fell behind enemy lines, effectively supplying the Russians. Hitler’s reaction was that of a man whom Behr described as having lost touch with reality. Behr, who used to be a supporter of Hitler, said at that

⁴³ Seth, 199.

⁴⁴ Beevor, 333.

⁴⁵ Shulman, 72.

moment he ended all illusions he had of Hitler, and was convinced they were going to lose the war.⁴⁶

The Aftermath

In the wake of the hugely unsuccessful “air-bridge”, Paulus was forced to surrender the Sixth Army to the Russians. Of the 220,000 surrounded Germans, 91,000 were taken prisoner by the Russians.⁴⁷ Paulus eventually became a fervent opponent of the Nazi party. He was called to testify as a witness at the Nuremburg trials, where he discredited Hitler’s leadership and went on record defending the decision he made to surrender. Paulus placed the blame on Hitler, and Hitler alone, for the destruction of the Sixth Army. He testified that Hitler ordered the invasion of Russia on his own terms, and that Paulus, among other Nazi officials, had concerns about Barbarossa from the beginning, but these apprehensions were ignored.⁴⁸

While the general consensus was that Hitler was responsible for the defeat at Stalingrad, there was also recognition that this was the turning point. Captain Behr, for example, had already stated that he knew they were now going to lose the war. Hitler had wasted millions of lives invading a country that resulted in nothing but defeats for him. The entire Sixth Army and Fourth Panzer Division were destroyed in the Battle of Stalingrad, and although Hitler rebuilt them, the Nazi’s had lost many of their top

⁴⁶ Beevor, 344-45.

⁴⁷ Beevor, 399.

⁴⁸ Yale Law School. “Avalon Project – The International Military Tribunal for Germany”. Avalon Project – Documents in Law, History, and Diplomacy. http://avalon.law.yale.edu/subject_menus/imt.asp (accesses December 9, 2012)

generals and seasoned veterans. Hitler's selfishness and impractical leadership of the German forces caused other generals to resign their posts, refusing to fight for the man. All of these circumstances came together in the most destructive way possible for the Germans, and after the Battle of Stalingrad was lost, there was no hope of victory.

Final Arguments

Of course, there are other arguments about the turning point of the war. The example of the German victory over France has already been explained, and shown to be false. However, the other major argument surrounding the turning point of World War II was the launch of Operation Barbarossa – that Germany was never capable of sustaining the invasion. It lacked the economic resources to supply a front of that magnitude for so long. However, the original German plan estimated that the Third Reich would have control of Russia in less than half a year, and therefore would be able to supply a brief invasion. The Germans were counting on supplies gathered from Russian civilians and prisoners.

None of the German's plans worked out, and Operation Barbarossa was repelled by the Red Army. While this defeat could have been the turning point, the Germans again pushed into Russia. Because this second push still might have resulted in a German victory, it meant that Operation Barbarossa was not the turning point. It was during this second push into Russia that the Battle of Stalingrad occurred, and Germany

lost the Sixth Army. This disastrous result led to the Germans being pushed back to the Russian border, and ultimately back into Germany.

Of course, if the Germans had won at Stalingrad the entire campaign in Russia could have ended much differently. Had the Germans successfully captured Stalingrad, and then the oil in the south, they potentially could have had the necessary resources to capture all of Russia. Hitler's leadership cost the Germans a victory at Stalingrad. Had he kept all the troops together and secured the city of Stalingrad before moving any forces south, it could have been possible to capture. And this, in turn, could have led to a possible seizure of the oil fields.

Obviously this is not what happened, and dealing in "what-if" history can be very tricky territory. It is safe to speculate, however, that if Hitler were not in full command of the Wehrmacht, and a competent military leader had control, then the entire German force might have moved on Stalingrad. It was a combination of Hitler as the military commander of the Third Reich, and the defeat at the Battle of Stalingrad, that was the turning point of the war. If Germany had a different leader, the Battle of Stalingrad could have had a different result, leading to a different result in all of Russia. And if Hitler had somehow emerged victorious in the Russian city, it also could have resulted in a different result in all of Russia. Instead, Hitler's leadership cost the German's almost 100,000 men as prisoners to the Red Army, not to mention the hundreds of thousands more troops who were killed in the fighting. Hitler's poor

military leadership led to the defeat at the Battle of Stalingrad, which in turn led to the German defeat in all of Russia, which eventually led to the German defeat in World War II.

It is easy to question why this entire paper has mattered. It is on a subject that has been extensively documented and no innovative breakthrough on the subject was made. However, this historical subject is still greatly important. It not only allows us to see how one of the world's greatest and most devastating wars ended, but it allows us to see why. That is still very much relevant today. For example, Hitler's leadership was the main reason the Germans were defeated. And this displays how important leadership really is, and how easily one leader can change the outcome of a war. While hopefully the world will never face another leader as devastating and destructive as Hitler was, it is important to remember the power that one man can possess over millions, and how quickly that man can change the course of history.

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