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# Hitler's Invasion of Russia in World War Two

By Laurence Rees

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The war between Nazi Germany and Stalin's Russia was always going to be hard-fought - but could anyone have predicted the scale of the destruction caused by this ill-considered attack?

## Introduction

In the whole of history there has never been a war like it. In its scale of destruction, the war on the Eastern Front was unique; from Leningrad to the Crimea, from Kiev to Stalingrad, the Soviet Union was devastated - at least 25 million Soviet citizens died. And in the end what did the German aggressors have to show for it?

A broken, divided country, which had lost much of its territory, and a people burdened with the knowledge that they had launched a racist war of annihilation and, in the process, spawned the cancer of the Holocaust. But at the time of the attack there were many people - and not just Germans - who thought that the decision to invade the Soviet Union was a rational act in pursuit of German self-interest and, moreover, that this was a war the Germans would win.

In the summer of 1940 Adolf Hitler, despite his swift and dramatic victory over France, faced a major military and political problem. The British would not do what seemed logical and what the Führer expected - they would not make peace. Yet Hitler was frustrated by geography - in the shape of the English Channel - from following his immediate instincts and swiftly crushing the British just as he had the French.

Hitler did in fact order preparations to be made for an invasion of England, but he was always half-hearted in his desire to mount a large seaborne landing. Germany, unlike Britain, was not a sea power and the Channel was a formidable obstacle. Even if air superiority could be gained, there remained the powerful British Navy. And there was another, ideological, reason why Hitler was not fully committed to invading Britain. For him, it would have been a distraction. Britain contained neither the space, nor the raw materials, that he believed the new German Empire needed. And he admired the British - Hitler often remarked how much he envied their achievement in subjugating India.

Worse, if the Germans let themselves be drawn into a risky amphibious operation against a country Hitler had never wanted as an enemy, every day the potential threat from his greatest ideological opponent would be growing stronger. (It was just ironic that he was not yet at war with this perceived enemy, since in August 1939 Germany and the Soviet Union had signed a Non-Aggression Pact.)

All this meant that, from Hitler's point of view, there was an alternative to invading Britain: he could invade the Soviet Union. Both Hitler and his military planners knew that Germany's best chance of victory was for the war in Europe to be finished swiftly.

Hubert Menzel was a major in the General Operations Department of the OKH (the Oberkommando des Heers, the German Army headquarters), and for him the idea of invading the Soviet Union in 1941 had the smack of cold, clear logic to it: 'We knew that in two years' time, that is by the end of 1942, beginning of 1943, the English would be ready, the Americans would be ready, the Russians would be ready too, and then we would have to deal with all three of them at the same time.... We had to try to remove the greatest threat from the East.... At the time it seemed possible.' (*The above paragraphs are taken from chapter one of 'War of the Century' by Laurence Rees, published by BBC Publications, 1999.*)

## Hitler invades

The Germans invaded the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, and looked poised to take Moscow by October that year. With the benefit of hindsight, popular opinion has labelled Hitler as virtually insane for invading the Soviet Union, but at the time many people - including those influential in both Britain and America - thought his decision was a sound one. Indeed, Hitler came much closer to pulling off his grand plan than the Soviet Union was ever prepared to admit.

The German Blitzkrieg technique was as devastating in Russia as it had been in the rest of Europe. The scene was set for a war of annihilation waged by the Nazis against the Soviets with no mercy shown by either side. One week into the German invasion, 150,000 Soviet soldiers were either dead or wounded - more than during the five months of the Battle of the Somme.



Russian soldier ©

As the German armies swept further into the Russian heartland, one million Soviet troops were drafted to protect Kiev. But despite Stalin's ruthless order forbidding any city to surrender, Kiev fell and 600,000 Soviet soldiers were captured. By October 1941, three million Soviet soldiers were prisoners of war. New testimony and documentary evidence can now reveal that Stalin was seriously considering suing for peace and had even organised a 'getaway' train to take him to safety as German guns started pounding Moscow. His decision to stay and fight was a crucial turning point in the war.

## A partisan war

Stalin and Hitler were together responsible for the *leitmotiv* of ruthless brutality that prevailed throughout the hostilities between Russia and Germany. During the Battle of Moscow, in which 8,000 Soviet citizens were executed for perceived cowardice, the Russian armies were forced to stand their ground, despite perishingly cold conditions of 43 degrees below freezing.



Russian PoW's ©

To prevent his soldiers deserting the front line around the capital, Stalin ordered special 'blocking detachments' to shoot all deserters. The Soviet leadership also instructed Soviet partisans operating in the countryside to kill anyone whom they believed was disloyal. This resulted in an effective *carte blanche* for partisans to abuse their power and extract whatever they wanted from helpless villagers.

A report from one partisan division shows that rape, killings and beatings were commonplace. To make villagers' lives still more hellish, in some areas, particularly the occupied Ukraine, nationalist partisans (as opposed to Soviet partisans), who were bent on freedom from the Soviet regime, also started up their own brutal operations in the countryside. Villagers were now faced with violence from three different fighting forces.

Russians did not suffer only from their own side. Nazi rule over the territories they captured from Russia was draconian. Erich Koch, Reich Commissar of occupied Ukraine stated that the 'lowliest German worker is a thousand times more valuable' than the entire population of the Ukraine. Starvation was widespread, with Soviet civilians forced to eat dogs - until the dog supply ran out and people were forced to turn to rats, crows and birch bark. In the Ukrainian town of Kharkov, which was administered by the German army, 100,000 people died of starvation and disease.

The German army, faced with an ever growing partisan threat, became increasingly comprehensive in their view about what constituted a partisan. One army document lists 1,900 partisans and their 'helpers', killed by the Germans in one action. But only 30 rifles and a handful of other weapons were found with them - more than 90% of those killed by the Germans had no guns.

And yet people still managed to survive. Inna Gavrilchenko tells how lucky she was to get a job in a slaughter house during the occupation of Kharkov. It gave her access to blood, which she smuggled out and cooked into a 'blood omelette'.

## Battle of Stalingrad

The tables were turned when Hitler set in motion one of the bitterest conflicts of the 20th century - the Battle of Stalingrad. In the spring of 1942, he launched a two-pronged attack in what he believed would be his final offensive in the East.



The Battle of Stalingrad ©

One set of troops headed towards Baku and its rich oil resources, whilst a second group pushed towards Stalingrad and the Volga. After more than a year of bitter defeats, the Soviet army was exhausted and demoralised, but it started to employ a new tactic - the fighting retreat - which put a strain on German supply lines. Soviet soldiers were no longer instructed by their generals to stand their ground at all costs. Instead they retreated - to avoid capture and continue fighting.

The Germans moved swiftly forward, reaching the banks of the River Volga. The German soldiers of Army Group B had one last major task - to take the city of Stalingrad on the west bank of the Volga.

And so began the bitter and bloody battle. More than 1,000 tons of bombs were dropped on the city, but Stalin initially forbade any evacuation from the city, even of children. Soviet reinforcements had to cross the Volga from the east and many of them drowned under the weight of their clothing and weapons. The average life-expectancy of a Soviet private soldier during the battle of Stalingrad was just 24 hours. The infamous Penal Units - some of them including political prisoners - took part in suicidal missions as a way of atoning for their 'sins'. By the end of the siege, one million Soviet soldiers had died on the Stalingrad front.

The ferocity of the fighting at Stalingrad shocked the Germans, who were used to the relative ease of their Blitzkrieg tactics. Suddenly they were faced with hand-to-hand combat, often only yards away from the enemy. 'Our principle was to grab hold of the enemy and not let go; to hold him very close - as you'd hold a loved one', says Anatoly Mersko, who served under General Chuikov.

Soviet veteran Suren Mirzoyan remembers the blood lust of the time. 'I was like a beast. I wanted only one thing - to kill. You know how it looks when you squeeze a tomato and juice comes out? Well, it looked like that when I stabbed them. Blood everywhere. Every step in Stalingrad meant death. Death was in our pockets. Death was walking with us.'

As the battle raged, it was also time of terror for ethnic minorities on both sides of the dispute. In Germany, Hitler's 'final solution' reached its horrific climax in extermination camps such as Auschwitz-Birkenau. Life expectancy for many on arrival could be measured in just hours.

In the USSR, meantime, Stalin's ruthless approach to punishing ethnic collaborators in the Soviet Union meant that whole ethnic nations were forcibly exiled to Siberia as punishment for the small number of collaborators in their midst. One of the ethnic groups who suffered most were the Kalmyks from the steppe south of Stalingrad. Stalin ordered every ethnic Kalmyk, including women and children, to be 'relocated' to even more remote regions of the Soviet Union.

Whole families were crammed onto insanitary transport trains. Many didn't survive the long journey. Officially, 93,000 Kalmyks, 68,000 Karachai people, 500,000 Chechens, 340,000 Balkars and 180,000 Tartars were deported. The figures are almost certainly underestimates.

## Russia's victory

In the spring of 1944, a Soviet invasion of Germany became a real possibility, as Soviet troops pursued the retreating German army. Hitler ordered the citizens of Germany to destroy anything that the enemy could put to good use. Embittered by defeats, he later turned against the Germans themselves. 'If the German people lose the war, then they will have proved themselves unworthy of me.'



Stalin and the head of his secret police, Lavrenti Beria ©

Hitler suffered his greatest military setback of the war in the summer of 1944. More destructive by far than the D-Day landings, Stalin's Operation Bagration in Belorussia eliminated three times more German army divisions than the Allies did in Normandy. Hitler retaliated by demanding specific divisions of the German army stand fast to the last man - the very tactic that Stalin had deployed so disastrously in the early days of the war. Defeat for Germany was only months away.

Final victory came for Russia when Soviet soldiers hoisted the red flag over the Berlin Reichstag in April 1945. The occupying troops celebrated, some indulging in the rape and murder of German citizens. When Stalin was told how some of the Red Army soldiers were treating German refugees, he is reported to say: 'We lecture our soldiers too much; let them have some initiative.'

"Vladlen Anchishkin, a Soviet battery commander on the 1st Ukrainian Front, sums up the horror of the whole event, when he tells how he took personal revenge on German soldiers: 'I can admit it now, I was in such a state, I was in such a frenzy. I said, 'Bring them here for an interrogation' and I had a knife, and I cut him. I cut a lot of them. I thought, 'You wanted to kill me, now it's your turn.'

## Find out more

### Books

*War of the Century - When Hitler Fought Stalin* by Laurence Rees (BBC Publications)

### Audio link

### Links

**Adolf Hitler - Der Führer** Medium-depth biography of Hitler.

**Nazi-Soviet relations, 1931-1941** Documents from the German Foreign Office, published in 1948.

**Map** A map of the Eastern Front, July 1943.

**Ukraine's war** An extremely extensive and in-depth history of Ukraine's war.

**Stalingrad** Mamaev Kurgan: The battle itself, Volgograd today and much more.

**The bombing of Berlin** In 1941 Germany pushed deep into Soviet territory, when the Soviet air-force hit back.

**Einsatz** Disturbing eyewitness account of an Einsatz execution.

**Katyn** An account of the execution of Polish POWs in 1940, by the NKVD.

## About the author

Laurence Rees, writer and producer of the six part BBC/PBS series 'World War Two Behind Closed Doors: Stalin, the Nazis and the West' is an award winning historian of World War Two and the Third Reich. His previous book 'Auschwitz: The Nazis and the "Final Solution"' won the British Book Award for History Book of the Year in 2006 and the television series of the same name won him a Grierson Documentary Award. He has written five other history books including, 'Nazis: A Warning from History', 'War of the Century', 'Horror in the East' and 'Their Darkest Hour'. 'Nazis a Warning from History', 'War of the Century' and 'Horror in the East' were also successful television documentary series - all written and produced by Laurence Rees.