

History of World War II: The Red Army's Winter Counteroffensive 80 years ago

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Beginning eight decades ago on 5 December 1941, the Soviet Army's counterattack against the Wehrmacht, principally along the outskirts of Moscow, was a major event in the Second World War and a significant occurrence in modern history. The Red Army counteroffensive officially lasted from early December 1941 until 7 May 1942.

The counterattack was titled by the Russians as the Winter Campaign of 1941-1942, and it provided evidence, both to themselves and the watching world, that the Wehrmacht was not invincible. The failure of Operation Barbarossa further placed a serious question mark over whether the Germans could win the war at all.

Very thankfully indeed, Moscow, the Soviet Union's largest and most important city, was saved from Nazi occupation. The commencement of the counterattack brought relief and hope to many people across Europe and beyond, who had despaired at the thought of a Nazi-dominated world.



Yet while the Soviet Army managed to drive the Wehrmacht back from the gates of Moscow, they were unable to turn the counteroffensive into a rout; which, in that

event, would most probably have led to the German Army's disintegration in the winter of 1941-42; and therefore the premature conclusion of the war, in Europe at least. French military leader Napoleon's armed forces, after all, had crumbled within 6 months of their June 1812 invasion of Russia.

It was for reasons like these that the Russian Marshal Georgy Zhukov, the most celebrated commander of World War II, bluntly termed the Soviet counteroffensive to be a "failure". Zhukov wrote in his memoirs, "The History of the Great Fatherland War still comes to a generally positive conclusion about the winter offensive of our forces, despite the lack of success. I do not agree with this evaluation. The embellishment of history, one could say, is a sad attempt to paint over failure. If you consider our losses and what results were achieved, it will be clear that it was a Pyrrhic victory". (1)

Zhukov was not exaggerating; he was a frontline general who could see what was going on before his eyes, and he had the resolve to voice his thoughts. As Zhukov noted, Red Army personnel losses during the counteroffensive were heavy, much higher than German casualties in what is often considered a landmark Soviet triumph. Altogether, during the three months of January, February and March 1942, the Soviet Army lost 620,000 men (2). By comparison, in the same period the Germans lost 136,000 men, well under a quarter of Russian casualties. (3)

The experienced British historian Evan Mawdsley, who focuses for the large part on Russian history, has presented the above casualty figures in his study of the Nazi-Soviet War. Mawdsley also stated, "German losses on the Eastern front, in the three and a quarter months through to the end of September 1941, numbered 185,000" and that "All told, the Red Army lost 177 divisions in 1941, most of them in the June-September period. Soviet military losses, up to the end of September 1941, have been given as at least 2,050,000". (4)

Joseph Stalin had said shortly after the Wehrmacht's defeat of France in June 1940, "we would be able to confront the Germans on an equal basis only by 1943" (5). This prediction was a far-sighted and accurate one. The Red Army "would only show great progress with Operation Bagration in Belorussia in June 1944", Mawdsley highlighted. (6)

Stalin is not recorded as mentioning why the Red Army was trailing the Wehrmacht by such a distance in the early 1940s; and considering that he was in charge of the USSR, for appreciably longer than Adolf Hitler was in power in Germany.

The Soviet military's shortcomings were at least in part because, as Marshal Zhukov said after the war, of "the enormous damage Stalin had inflicted on the country by his massacre of the top echelons of the army command" (7).

Zhukov's opinion is backed by others like Leopold Trepper, a leading Soviet intelligence operative and anti-Nazi Resistance fighter, who wrote that with the purges, "The Red Army, bled white, was hardly an army at all now, and it would not be again for years". (8)

Meanwhile, as the Soviet counteroffensive began the Red Army, between December 1941 and March 1942, would receive 117 new divisions to bolster its ranks. The main

opposing force, German Army Group Centre, was supplemented with a meagre 9 divisions during that time. (9)

By 26 November 1941 the Germans had suffered 743,112 casualties, not including the sick or frostbitten – and at the end of February 1942, total German losses on the Eastern front amounted to 1,005,636 men; this equates to about 31% of the original German invasion force, according to military scholar Donald J. Goodspeed, who has provided these various statistics (10). In comparison, the Soviet Army had suffered around 5.5 million casualties come the early spring of 1942.

Hitler placed immense store in the millions of casualties his divisions had inflicted on the Red Army (11). By late February 1942 he was again confident in ultimate victory. A jovial Hitler declared to his close colleagues at the Wolfsschanze headquarters, “Sunday will be the 1st of March. Boys, you can’t imagine what that means to me – how much the last three months have worn out my strength, tested my nervous resistance”. (12)

During December 1941 and in the months ahead, many German commanders in varying degrees continued to believe in victory. Goodspeed observed that the Wehrmacht hierarchy “reasoned that they were still better summer soldiers than the Russians, and that they should therefore fight in the summertime” in order to “build up their shattered armies for another great drive in 1942”. (13)

Hitler and the generals’ confidence would prove misplaced. The Soviets could afford far greater losses in personnel than the Germans, and this should have been no real surprise. The Soviet Union’s population in 1941 was about 193 million, that is 80 million or so more than the Third Reich’s populace. The Soviet counterattack grand strategy called for an assault along a broad front, 800 miles in width, from Leningrad in the north to the Crimean peninsula in the south (14). Its aim was to deliver a succession of blows that would gravely undermine the Germans and their Axis allies, resulting in the enemy’s swift collapse, or so it was envisaged.

This strategy was formulated with decisive input by Stalin, in conjunction with the Supreme High Command (Stavka). Zhukov was in firm disagreement with the counteroffensive’s strategic design. In his memoirs Zhukov wrote that he alone “dared to voice criticism” about the plan to Stalin and Stavka. (15)

For the counterattack, Zhukov favoured amassing their forces and directing them in a smashing thrust through the middle “against the enemy centre of gravity”. This strategy may well have inflicted a grievous hit, which the Germans would have struggled to recover from. Instead, with the dispersal of Soviet divisions across an extended front, the strength of the blow was diluted. Zhukov felt that he lacked the forces necessary to reach his goals.

Of the Russian counteroffensive strategy Mawdsley realised, “The Stavka made the same mistake that Hitler and his High Command had made in 1941, assuming the enemy to be exhausted and shattered. It also attempted, as the Germans did in Operation Barbarossa, to attack everywhere. Zhukov’s view was that it would have been much wiser to concentrate resources and get to the line Staraia Russa-Velikie Luki-Vitebsk-Smolensk-Briansk”. (16)

Zhukov's favoured striking line was 350 miles in breadth, as opposed to the 800 miles which Stalin preferred. Despite Zhukov's misgivings about Soviet strategy, his still significant role in the counterattack got off to an impressive start from 6 December 1941. Zhukov found himself in opposition to one of the Wehrmacht's most prominent generals, Heinz Guderian, commanding the 2nd Panzer Army.

There was severe bloodshed on both sides but Zhukov's divisions prevailed over those of Guderian, by forcing the latter to retreat over more than 50 miles of ground (17). Zhukov's reputation, now already high in the Soviet Union, was deservedly enhanced further.

English historian Chris Bellamy revealed how Zhukov expounded, in a directive of 13 December 1941, that Soviet troops should force the enemy to retreat 130 to 160 kilometres (80 to 100 miles) west of Moscow (18). Once that was accomplished, Zhukov continued that the Red Army should thereafter "spend the rest of the winter driving the Germans back another 150 kilometres (93 miles) or so to the line east of Smolensk [230 miles west of Moscow] from which they had launched Typhoon in early October". (19)

Zhukov's scaled-down ambitions for the counteroffensive were realistic, but even then would fall a good distance short. Zhukov complained bitterly that many Soviet units elsewhere had been poorly led and "were continually trying to attack the Germans frontally, rather than being smart and working their way round the sides". (20)

Mawdsley wrote, "In reality the Red Army was a very weak instrument in the winter of 1941-42, manned by untrained conscripts and poorly equipped. In January 1942, the whole Red Army had only 600 heavy tanks and 800 medium tanks, plus 6,300 light tanks; in contrast, the figure for January 1943 was 2,000 heavies [tanks], no fewer than 7,600 mediums, and 11,000 lights". (21)

Hitler was aware that Napoleon's Grand Armée had dissolved in full retreat 129 years before (22). Undeterred by this, in the face of Soviet counterattacks, some senior German commanders wanted a retirement far west of Moscow, to the Berezina or Niemen rivers (stretching across Belarus and Lithuania).

Such a retreat in mid-December, through knee and waist-deep snow, could have resulted in the destruction of the German Army. At a minimum, vast quantities of artillery and other equipment would undoubtedly have been lost - and during a season which "turned out to be one of the most severe winters on record", a research study noted in the Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society. (23)

By 20 February 1942, the Germans had suffered 112,627 frostbite casualties (24). This problem did not afflict the Russians to anything like the same degree; because the latter were warmly clad and had a working railway system right behind them, while they were used to fighting in winter conditions. Stalin said after the Soviets had finally overcome Finland in March 1940, "It is not true that the army's fighting capacity decreases in wintertime... We are a northern country". (25)

In the middle of December 1941 Hitler issued his standfast order. He demanded that

German officers, from herein, compel the soldiers under them to hold their ground at whatever cost. Hitler went on that German troops in the field should ignore the danger, when enemy forces have “broken through on the flanks or in the rear. This is the only way to gain the time necessary, to bring up the reinforcements from Germany and the West that I have ordered”. (26)

Hitler had previously interfered fatally in German strategic planning, most notably by postponing the advance on Moscow by six weeks in August 1941; but his hold-at-all-cost order was in all likelihood the correct decision, and it may have rescued the Wehrmacht that winter. (27)

The Germans prudently made no attempt to retain a continuous line from Leningrad to the Crimea. Hitler and the German High Command (OHK) agreed on implementing a series of strongpoints, known as “hedgehogs” (28). These fortified positions were often erected beside large German supply depots, located from north to south, in such urban areas under Nazi occupation as Shlisselburg, Novgorod, Rzhev, Vyazma, Bryansk and Kharkov, etc. Subsidiary strongpoints were then constructed beside the principal strongholds.

The reality on the ground was more complicated than this; for the German hedgehogs were sometimes established in response to local Soviet tactical successes, rather than simply through the will of the Germans (29). Breakthroughs by Russian soldiers on the flanks were deemed acceptable by Wehrmacht commanders, since any Soviet division that proceeded too far was in danger of being cut off, and trapped behind German lines.

In early January 1942, Stalin came to the conclusion that total victory over the Nazis could be achieved that very year. On 10 January Stalin dispatched a directive to his generals outlining, “Our task is not to give the Germans a breathing space, to drive them westwards without a halt, force them to exhaust their reserves before springtime when we shall have fresh big reserves, while the Germans will have no more reserves; this will ensure the complete defeat of the Nazi forces in 1942”. (30)

As events would show, such directives were too ambitious and underestimated the Wehrmacht’s resilience. Mawdsley wrote, “Stalin’s January 1942 strategy of wearing down German reserves before the spring did not work... In fact, however, on much of the front the Germans were able to hold on to the territory they had reached in early December 1941. Even at Rostov and Moscow, they had only had to fall back 50 to 150 miles. They were still very deep in Soviet territory. In the north and centre they would hold this line until late 1943”. (31)

Remarkably, by May 1944 German Army Group Centre was still only 290 miles from Moscow at its closest point; whereas Soviet forces were 550 miles from Berlin in the early summer of 1944. (32)

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Notes

- 1 Evan Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East: The Nazi-Soviet War, 1941-1945* (Hodder Arnold, 23 Feb. 2007) p. 127
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 147
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 *Ibid.*, pp. 85-86
- 5 Robert Service, *Stalin: A Biography* (Pan; Reprints edition, 16 April 2010) p. 406
- 6 Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East*, p. 148
- 7 Andrei Gromyko, *Memories: From Stalin to Gorbachev* (Arrow Books Limited, 1 Jan. 1989) p. 216
- 8 Leopold Trepper, *The Great Game: Memoirs of a Master Spy* (Michael Joseph Ltd; First Edition, 1 May 1977) p. 67
- 9 Donald J. Goodspeed, *The German Wars* (Random House Value Publishing, 2nd edition, 3 April 1985) p. 407
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East*, p. 110
- 12 Adolf Hitler, *Hitler's Table Talk*, New Foreword by Gerhard L. Weinberg (Enigma Books, 30 April 2008) p. 257
- 13 Goodspeed, *The German Wars*, p. 405
- 14 Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East*, p. 120
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 128
- 17 Goodspeed, *The German Wars*, p. 404
- 18 Chris Bellamy, *Absolute War: Soviet Russia in the Second World War* (Pan; Main Market edition, 21 Aug. 2009) p. 332
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 331
- 21 Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East*, p. 148
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 119
- 23 J. Neumann and H. Flohn, Great Historical Events That Were Significantly Affected by the Weather: Part 8, Germany's War on the Soviet Union, 1941-45. Long-range Weather Forecasts for 1941-42 and Climatological Studies, *Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society*, [Jstor](#)

- 24 John Toland, Adolf Hitler: The Definitive Biography (Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, 3 Feb. 2007) Part 8, The Fourth Horseman
- 25 Mawdsley, Thunder in the East, pp. 107-108
- 26 Ibid., p. 121
- 27 Goodspeed, The German Wars, pp. 405-406
- 28 Ibid., p. 406
- 29 Ibid., p. 407
- 30 Geoffrey Roberts, Stalin's Wars: From World War to Cold War, 1939-1953 (Yale University Press; 1st Edition, 14 Nov. 2006) p. 116
- 31 Mawdsley, Thunder in the East, p. 147
- 32 Samuel W. Mitcham Jr., Hitler's Field Marshals and Their Battles (Guild Publishers, 1988) p. 274

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