

When Did Hitler Realise that Nazi Germany Would Lose the War?

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It can be interesting to analyse when the Nazi leader Adolf Hitler began to doubt in a German victory during World War II – and when these uncertainties turned to a feeling that the Wehrmacht, with increasing probability, would lose the war.

On 16 July 1941, three and a half weeks into Operation Barbarossa, German Army Group Centre reached the western Russian city of Smolensk, less than 250 miles from Moscow.



To many outside observers at this moment, it looked as if a German success was an inevitability. Army Group Centre's pincers closed around Smolensk but, instead of collapsing, the trapped Russian divisions fought on valiantly for 3 weeks until 7 August.

German historian Volker Ullrich, in the second volume (Downfall: 1939-45) of his biography of Hitler, wrote, "From mid-July [1941], the resistance of the Red Army stiffened and the Wehrmacht's forward progress was halted for the first time". It was now becoming clear to the German high command (OKH) that the lightning victory against the USSR, which they had previously expected, was not going to materialise.

At this time in July 1941 the Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, a close associate of Hitler, believed that the German public should "no longer be promised so much"; but they needed to be "informed about the harshness of the battle taking place in the east"; Goebbels continued "the Bolsheviks are putting up fiercer resistance than we imagined, and above all the matériel at their disposal is greater than we assumed".

Goebbels the poison dwarf had, moreover, no military experience and such views on the Soviet performance should be treated with some caution. There were examples of staunch Russian resistance from June 1941 but, in all, the Red Army was weak and vulnerable in the early 1940s, largely because it had endured great injury as a result of Joseph Stalin's purges. To compound matters Stalin had refused to believe the intelligence reports, warning him of Hitler's coming invasion, which ensured that the Red Army was also unprepared when the blow came. Robert Service, in his biography of the Soviet ruler, wrote of Stalin, "The German armies had had no more compliant victim". (Service, p. 410)

Three weeks into the Nazi-Soviet War, Victor Klemperer, a prominent German scholar, wrote in his diary on 13 July 1941 after speaking to a compatriot who was located near to the front, "We were suffering tremendous losses, had underestimated the Russians' power of resistance" and "That seemed plausible to me for a while". Though the Russians had been underestimated, the Wehrmacht was not suffering tremendous losses by 13 July.

At the end of the month, after nearly 6 weeks of fighting, by 31 July 1941 the Germans had suffered 213,301 casualties on the Eastern front, including wounded and missing (Bellamy, *Absolute War*, p. 245). It should be highlighted that in many cases these were not irrecoverable losses. A considerable proportion of the 213,301, having recovered from injuries or found their way back to German lines, then returned to the fighting. Furthermore, up to 31 July 1941 the Germans received 47,000 fresh troops who joined the fighting in the east. These figures have been provided by military historian Chris Bellamy in his analysis of the Nazi-Soviet War.

At the end of September 1941, the Germans had suffered 185,000 irrecoverable losses, which translates to deaths, severe injuries like decapitations and those permanently missing, etc. The damage was far worse on the Soviet side. Russian specialist Evan Mawdsley explained, "The paradox was that although the Red Army had not been destroyed in the initial onslaught, it had suffered near mortal damage". (Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East*, p. 86)

The Army Group Centre commander, Fedor von Bock, wrote in late July 1941, "The Russians are unbelievably tough". Von Bock's views are supported by another high-level commander,

Gotthard Heinrici, leading the German 43rd Army Corps. Heinrici stated, "The enemy facing us is an astonishingly active and tenacious fellow".

Von Bock and Heinrici may well have been influenced by memories of the French Army's display the summer before – and that any concerted resistance would seem strong, by comparison to the dismal French performance in the 1940 Battle of France. About 1.5 million Red Army troops were in Nazi captivity by mid-August 1941, rising to more than 3 million by the middle of October. (Bellamy, p. 23)

Hitler himself started to become unsure about the German victory over the Soviet Union, or more accurately at this stage the speed of it, by late July/early August 1941; that is, when the invasion was 5 or 6 weeks old. Hitler suddenly became thoughtful and uncommunicative during daily lunches with guests, at the Wolf's Lair military headquarters in East Prussia.

Before the Nazi-Soviet War had commenced, Hitler told Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt of the USSR, "You have only to kick in the door and the whole rotten structure will come crashing down". The door had been kicked in alright, but the structure was still standing.

Ullrich wrote,

"It is perhaps no accident that the first time Hitler fell ill during the war was in early August 1941, when he realised that his plans for a Blitzkrieg campaign in the east had failed. The dictator told his personal physician [Theodor Morell] that he had never felt worse in his life, complaining of dizziness and nausea and declaring himself unable for several days to take part in situation meetings".

Hitler's diminishing confidence in the quick triumph is reflected in comments he made; which with his prior agreement were recorded by stenographers, as part of his broader views for posterity purposes, and 6 years after the war were published in the book 'Hitler's Table Talk'. On 10 August 1941, with Barbarossa now 7 weeks old Hitler said, "As regards the campaign in Russia, there were two conflicting views: one was that Stalin would choose the tactics of retreat, as in 1812; the other, that we must expect a desperate resistance. I was practically alone in believing this second eventuality".

These were self-serving remarks, which do not reflect his pre-war predictions. The comments are revealing in Hitler's admission of what he perceived to be the Red Army's "desperate resistance". The German high command had estimated in mid-December 1940 that "the Soviet Union would be defeated in a campaign not exceeding 8-10 weeks", reflecting Hitler's pre-conflict views.

Unknown to the German population, feelings of a rapid success among the Nazi hierarchy were disappearing by July and August 1941. On 27 August – 9 and a half weeks into Barbarossa – a German high command memorandum, approved by Hitler, outlined that "if it proves impossible to realize this objective completely during 1941, the continuation of the eastern campaign has top priority for 1942". By late summer, it seems German thoughts were drifting somewhat to 1942.

On 27 September 1941, with the invasion almost 14 weeks old, Hitler said, "We must pursue two aims: 1 – To hold our positions on the Eastern front at all costs. 2 – To keep the war as far as possible from our frontiers". (Hitler's Table Talk, p. 36)

It is telling that Hitler made no mention here of final victory, not in 1941 at any rate. The German progress in particular was slow in the Ukraine, a country larger than France which it would take the Wehrmacht, the world's strongest military machine, 4 months of bitter fighting to subdue. Kharkov was the last major Ukrainian city to fall, when it was captured by the German 6th Army on 24 October 1941.

Regarding the Russian weather, Hitler said in August 1941 that the "autumn rain season of the Moscow region begins about mid-October" (quote appears in the Flohn-Neumann study, p. 5). Therefore the impassable mud, which crucially stalled the German advance for successive days at the latter end of October 1941, would have come as little surprise. The severity of the mud conditions could not have bolstered Hitler's confidence, nor would the coming Russian winter, which struck hard from around 11 November 1941. It would be one of the worst winters on record in one of the world's coldest countries, the climatologists Hermann Flohn and Jehuda Neumann have highlighted.

As autumn turned to winter, did Hitler despair of the ultimate German victory in early December 1941?; when the Soviet Army conducted its surprise counteroffensive, against the static Wehrmacht divisions near Moscow. At this point, 5 and a half months into the conflict, Hitler would certainly have started to doubt in victory; but it is surely not a normal human reaction, when the German armies had advanced so far and destroyed so much of the enemy's forces, that when the first big setback comes to feel that everything is lost.

However, Hitler's uncertainties are evident towards the end of January 1942, when Army Group Centre was in danger of being encircled by the Russians. Mawdsley wrote, "Hitler told his intimates that Germany might fail". The threat to Army Group Centre was averted, when the Soviet pincers were beaten back by counterstrokes launched from the German 9th Army.

The Wehrmacht's stoic performance in the winter of 1941-42, would have given Hitler and the German generals cause for renewed hope. At the end of February 1942 Hitler boasted, "Now that January and February are past, our enemies can give up the hope of our suffering the fate of Napoleon. They've lost nothing by waiting. Now we're about to switch over to squaring the account. What a relief!"

German confidence levels increased further during the spring. In the 3 months between April to June 1942, the Red Army suffered 780,000 irrecoverable losses, as opposed to just 52,000 such losses for the invaders in the same period (Mawdsley, p. 147). Mawdsley acknowledged, "After the crisis in front of Moscow during the winter of 1941-42, it was extraordinary that Hitler and the Wehrmacht were able to grasp the initiative again". (P. 149)

In summer fighting especially, the Germans were simply operating at a much higher level than the Red Army. It was chiefly for this reason that Hitler and the Wehrmacht hierarchy, though not as optimistic as in June 1941, still felt in early 1942 they could inflict a hammer blow on the Soviets in the summer to come; thereby placing themselves in a dominant position in the war, or so that is what they hoped.

During the 4 month period from May to August 1942 - in what the Russian-born author Alexander Werth described as the "Black Summer of 1942" - the Germans inflicted further heavy damage on the Red Army, and made vast territorial gains across the south-western USSR. In the late summer of 1942, Nazi Germany's territory was equal to the size of land

captured by the Macedonian military ruler, Alexander the Great, in the 4th Century BC.



Waffen-SS infantry and armour advancing, Summer 1942 (Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 de)

By August 1942, Hitler believed that victory was at hand. On 9 August he said, “We shall become the most self-supporting State, in every respect, including cotton, in the world... Timber we shall have in abundance, iron in limitless quantity, the greatest manganese-ore mines in the world, oil – we shall swim in it!” (Table Talk, p. 471)

The following month, September 1942, Hitler insisted, “The Russians are finished. In four weeks they will collapse”. These ebullient claims were misplaced and, two months later, belief in the war’s successful conclusion was ebbing away, and a feeling was replacing it that Germany would probably lose the war. This was in the second half of November 1942, when Hitler was receiving news that German-Axis forces in Stalingrad were being surrounded and squeezed by the Soviet Army; while his offensive in the Caucasus had by then failed, and Field Marshal Erwin Rommel’s panzers in North Africa were facing impossible odds.

The Nazi Minister of Armaments, Albert Speer, recalled visiting Hitler at Obersalzberg in southern Bavaria, during the latter stages of November 1942. Writing from his Spandau prison cell on 20 November 1952, Speer remembered going for a walk 10 years before with Hitler and his Alsatian dog along a mountain pathway.

As they trudged together through the snow Speer wrote of Hitler, “An old man, a man who was really already defeated, stood there in the snow impotently squeezing out his stored-up bitterness, his toxic resentments”. Speer discerned Hitler’s “dawning recognition that the war was already lost”. (Spandau, The Secret Diaries, pp. 230-231)

This would appear accurate. In the early summer of 1942 Hitler forecast, “If we do not capture the oil supplies of the Caucasus by the autumn, then I shall have to face the fact

that we cannot win this war”.

Hitler suffered apparently irreversible defeats in the past, but he had survived and come back, gaining supreme success by grabbing power in Germany in January 1933. It had looked like his political career was over with the fiasco of the November 1923 Beer Hall Putsch, and his subsequent imprisonment in March 1924. It seemed he was destined to remain a political joke, with the results of the May 1928 German federal election – when the Nazi Party posted a miserable 2.6% of the national vote, whereas the Social Democratic Party recorded 29.6% of the national vote and the Communist Party 10.6%.

Within 5 years Hitler had somehow become chancellor of Germany. Maybe it was memories of his rise to power against the odds, which meant that he did not fully give up hope of victory after the Stalingrad defeat. Following the German success of arms at Kharkov, in eastern Ukraine in mid-March 1943, Hitler called it “a turning point in the fortunes of battle”. Whether he believed it is unlikely.

Yet historian Geoffrey Roberts pointed out, “Once again, the Red Army’s capabilities had not matched Stavka’s ambitions, and the Germans had proved surprisingly resilient in the wake of the devastating defeat at Stalingrad”.

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