

History of World War II: 81 Years Ago, The Battle of Moscow

Part I

By [Shane Quinn](#)

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The heavily decorated panzer commander Hasso von Manteuffel knew Adolf Hitler reasonably well, having met him on numerous occasions from the summer of 1943 until the spring of 1945.

During their discussions, Manteuffel recognised Hitler's extensive knowledge of military history but, crucially, the German general discerned also the dictator's shortcomings as a commander. Hitler's inadequacies in the military domain were hardly surprising, for he was not really a soldier at all, but a politician, who had no formal military education; unlike Manteuffel who was a renowned strategist.

The American historians Samuel W. Mitcham and Gene Mueller, in their co-authored book 'Hitler's Commanders', outlined the following, "Although Manteuffel was impressed with Hitler's grasp of combat from the field soldier's point of view, as well as the Fuehrer's knowledge of military literature, he recognized Hitler's weaknesses concerning grand strategy and tactical awareness, even though the Fuehrer had a flair for originality and daring. Although he was always respectful, Manteuffel always expressed his own views, regardless of how they might be received by Hitler". (1)

It is no exaggeration to state that the outcome of World War II rested mostly upon Hitler's deficiencies as a military leader – and specifically the decisions made, from June to August 1941, relating to grand strategy in the invasion of the Soviet Union (Operation Barbarossa). The turning point in the war had come over a year before the German defeat at Stalingrad. (2)

Beginning on 22 June 1941 the German-led attack on the USSR, which culminated late that

year in the Battle of Moscow, apart from being the most brutal and murderous invasion ever, was by a strategic standpoint deeply flawed. From the start, the Wehrmacht's invasion force of three million German soldiers was sliced up into three Army Groups, which were ordered to capture a number of difficult targets simultaneously (Leningrad, the Ukraine, Moscow, the Crimea, the Caucasus, etc.).

The most important objective by far was the capital city, Moscow, the Soviet Union's biggest metropolis. Almost all roads and railways in the western USSR led irresistibly to the gates of Moscow, like spokes directed into the centre of a wheel (3). If the wheel (Moscow) is put out of action, the rest of the structure cannot function properly. Moscow was the communications hub and power centre of Soviet Russia, where Joseph Stalin and his entourage were headquartered. Stalin himself placed immense store in Moscow's survival.

Stalin asked his famous general, Georgy Zhukov, late in 1941 "with an aching heart" whether "we will hold Moscow?... Tell me honestly, as a Communist" (4). General Zhukov replied to Stalin that Moscow will be held "without fail". Stalin made sure that the road to Moscow was defended whenever possible by large Soviet forces, even when Hitler had turned his attention elsewhere.

Commanded by the 60-year-old Field Marshal Fedor von Bock, Army Group Centre was tasked with capturing the Russian capital. Hitler's criminal intentions regarding Moscow were clear, as he remarked on the night of 5 July 1941, "Moscow, as the center of the doctrine [Bolshevism], must disappear from the earth's surface as soon as its riches have been brought to shelter. There's no question of our collaborating with the Muscovite proletariat". (5)

From 22 June 1941, had Army Group Centre been directed in a single great thrust towards Moscow, and in doing so protected by Army Group North and Army Group South acting as flank guards, the German Army could well have taken Moscow by the end of August 1941 (6). Top level German commanders like Franz Halder, Heinz Guderian and von Bock recognised Moscow's importance. Were the capital to fall, the Soviet rail and communications systems would have been shattered. With their centre blown apart, this would have posed enormous difficulties for the Red Army in supplying and bolstering their northern and southern fronts.



German armored column advances on the Moscow front, October 1941 (Source: Public Domain)

General Halder stated in a memorandum, of 18 August 1941, that the bulk of the Red Army was being massed in front of Moscow for its defence. If these Soviet divisions were defeated “the Russians would no longer be able to maintain a joined-up defensive front”, Halder wrote. (7)

It is necessary to stress that the Soviet military was not ready for war with Nazi Germany in mid-1941. However, the damage inflicted by Stalin’s purges on the Red Army, from 1937, has routinely been blown out of proportion in the West.

Experienced British scholar Evan Mawdsley, a specialist in Russian history, noted correctly how “The Red Army commanders who were executed were not proven military leaders” in mechanised warfare and “Many able middle-level commanders survived the purges”; but he acknowledged too that “the execution of even a few hundred officers would be a traumatic event in any army” and this “was particularly devastating at the uppermost levels”. (8)

Considerable harm was caused then but it was far from fatal, which events would show, as the Red Army boasted top class commanders such as Zhukov, Konstantin Rokossovsky and Aleksandr Vasilevsky. The Soviet military reforms were not close to completion by June 1941, debunking the right-wing fantasy that Stalin was then preparing an attack on Germany. Stalin knew that the conflict with Nazism was approaching, but he hoped to put it off until 1942 or later; Stalin’s close associate Vyacheslav Molotov recalled the former saying shortly after the Fall of France, “we would be able to confront the Germans on an equal basis only by 1943”. (9)

The Germans, therefore, had a huge advantage as they attacked an ill-prepared and static Soviet military in June 1941. By the first week of July 1941 for example, nearly 4,000 Soviet aircraft were destroyed, most of them on the ground (10). Yet with Operation Barbarossa’s

strategic design of attacking the entirety of the western USSR at once, the strength of the Nazi blow was ultimately diluted. The Russians were given time to recover, and to their credit they did not collapse like the French the year before.

Two months into the invasion, on 21 August 1941 Hitler compounded the early strategic errors of Barbarossa, by fatefully postponing the advance on Moscow. Mitcham and Mueller describe this decision as “one of the greatest mistakes of the war” as the Soviets’ “most important city [Moscow]” was demoted to secondary stature (11). Hitler ordered that the Wehrmacht instead take the Crimea, the Donbas and the Caucasus while he also demanded “the investment of Leningrad and the linking up with the Finns”.

Three days before, on 18 August 1941, the German high command (OKH) had issued a request for the capture of Moscow post haste, but Hitler replied that “The army’s suggestion for continuing operations in the east does not conform to my intentions” (12). It was to the Wehrmacht’s detriment that Hitler, through his force of personality, had succeeded in gaining complete control over all German military operations. With these new orders of 21 August 1941, Nazi Germany’s defeat in the Second World War was assured. (13)

Donald J. Goodspeed, a military historian who had fought against the Nazi empire with the Canadian Army Overseas, wrote of Hitler’s 21 August directive,

“Thus a clear-cut, feasible, and single military objective [capturing Moscow] was set aside, and for it was substituted a double-headed monstrosity. Hitler was greedy and saw too many things at once. Army Group Center was to be halted, immobile, around Smolensk [240 miles west of Moscow], while rich new territories were to be taken in the south and Leningrad was to be eliminated in the north. Nor was it only that a double objective had been substituted for a single one. In the south Hitler wanted the Crimea, the Donbas and the Caucasus; in the north he wanted both Leningrad and the Karelian Isthmus”. (14)

In late August 1941, Army Group Centre was stripped of its armour which was sent south to the Ukraine. The march into the Ukraine did result in a major German victory as its capital Kiev, the USSR’s third largest city, fell to a giant pincers movement on 19 September 1941. Stalin ignored the advice of among others Zhukov, who had sensed impending danger weeks before by warning on 29 July 1941, “the Red Army should withdraw to the east of the Dnepr river”. (15)



Moscow women dig anti-tank trenches around their city in 1941 (Source: Public Domain)

Around Kiev by 26 September 1941, no less than 665,000 Soviet troops were caught within the German pincers and taken prisoner, the biggest surrender of forces in military history. The Soviet prisoners of war (POWs) now had to face the horrors of Nazi captivity.

Mawdsley, in his lengthy analysis of the Nazi-Soviet War, wrote that "In terms of scale, the fatalities among Red Army POWs were second only to the mass murder of the European Jews. Although an important part of the charges at the Nuremberg Trials, the story was far less prominent in the Cold War years. A quarter to a third of all the USSR's 10 million military deaths were soldiers who died in captivity. The exact figure can never be calculated, but the most commonly accepted German figure is 3,300,300 Soviet POWs dying in captivity, some 58% of the 5,700,000 taken prisoner. The Russians accept a lower figure of Red Army POWs, 4,559,000, and 2,500,000 deaths, but with a similar death rate of 55%". (16)

Dreadful as the loss of Kiev ranked, September was almost gone and the worst of autumn was closing in fast. The German Army, along with its panzer divisions, was weakened by the hundreds of miles they traversed in the Ukraine. Hitler had issued Directive No. 35 on 6 September 1941, belatedly assigning Moscow as the next principal target. When the Wehrmacht's claws closed around Kiev on 14 September, the German high command began to reinforce Army Group Centre.

Field Marshal von Bock, leading Army Group Centre, would soon have more than 1.5 million men under his command. Despite efficient German staff work, it was 26 September 1941 before final orders could be relayed for the assault on Moscow, and not until six days later did the offensive begin, hopefully titled Operation Typhoon. Hitler's interference had resulted in a critical six week delay.

On 2 October 1941, as the Battle of Moscow commenced, it seemed to many outside observers that the Germans would yet prevail. The weather, overall, held good for the time being and the countryside was relatively flat and open, suitable terrain for the panzer formations. During the first three weeks of October 1941, an incredible 86 Soviet divisions were destroyed. Army Group Centre captured 663,000 Soviet soldiers and eradicated 1,200 enemy tanks. The English historian, Geoffrey Roberts, wrote that total Soviet personnel losses in the opening phase of October “numbered a million, including nearly 700,000 captured by the Germans”. (17)

Most of the damage done to the Red Army here came in another massive pincers manoeuvre, which the Germans implemented around the medieval Russian towns of Vyazma and Bryansk, 150 miles apart. The northern pincer at Vyazma was the more effective, as five Russian armies were trapped and annihilated by 13 October 1941. The ring was not so tightly held at the southern pincer around Bryansk, where three Russian armies were caught and wiped out.



German soldiers west of Moscow, December 1941 (Licensed under CC BY 3.0)

Roberts highlighted that, “The encirclements were a devastating blow to the Bryansk, Western and Reserve fronts defending the approaches to Moscow” (18). When the Wehrmacht reached Vyazma on 7 October 1941, they were less than 140 miles from Moscow. On that day, the first snow flurries arrived in western Russia, an ill omen for the lightly-dressed Germans and their Axis allies, such as the Romanians and Italians. The snow was not heavy and quickly disappeared.

On 5 October 1941, the Soviet cause had been given a significant boost, when Stalin telephoned General Zhukov in Leningrad and asked him “can you board a plane and come to Moscow?” Zhukov was being designated with leading the defence of the capital. Zhukov

agreed by replying, "I ask for permission to fly out tomorrow morning at dawn" and Stalin said, "Very well. We await your arrival in Moscow tomorrow". (19)

For now, there was only so much that Zhukov could do. On 12 October 1941 Army Group Centre stormed the Russian city of Kaluga, 93 miles south-west of Moscow (20). A week later, 19 October, the Germans occupied the abandoned town of Mozhaysk, just 65 miles west of Moscow. The road apparently lay open and panic started to grip the capital. It is little wonder that Zhukov considered the dates, between the 10th to the 20th of October 1941, as "the most dangerous moment for the Red Army" in the entire war. (21)

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Shane Quinn obtained an honors journalism degree. He is interested in writing primarily on foreign affairs, having been inspired by authors like Noam Chomsky.

He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

Notes

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16 Mawdsley, Thunder In The East, p. 103

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21 Mawdsley, Thunder In The East, p. 105

Featured image: "Defense of Moscow". Anti-aircraft gunners on the roof of Moscow's central Hotel "Moskva". The Great Patriotic War (1941-1945). Reprophoto. (Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0)

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