

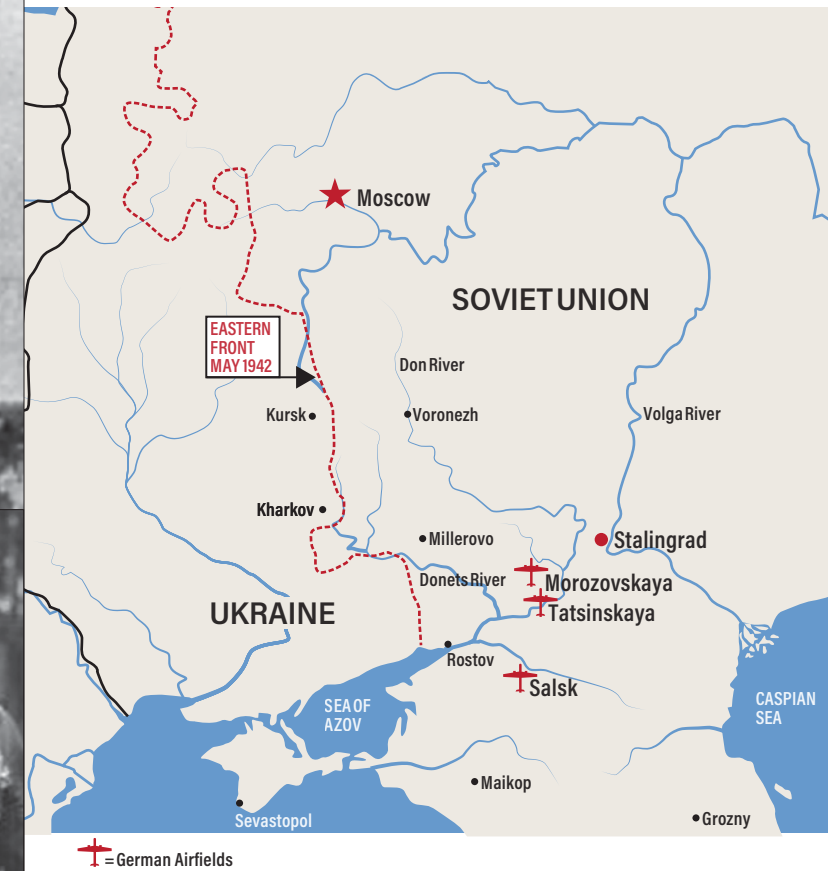


Turning Point at STALINGRAD

By John T. Correll



THE EASTERN THEATER 1942



It was the biggest, most costly battle in the history of warfare. Hitler lost the strategic initiative there and never regained it.

Germany's ill-considered invasion of the Soviet Union foundered in the intense cold and snow, 10 miles short of Moscow, in December 1941. However, Adolf Hitler—who had assumed personal command of the German armed forces—refused to accept the failure of his winter operation as anything more than a temporary setback.

Hitler still hoped to knock the Soviets out of the war before Britain and the United States could be ready to invade occupied Western Europe. The Germans were deep into Russia, holding a 1,500-mile front running from the Baltic to the Black Sea. They occupied half of European Russia, an area encompassing some 40 percent of the Soviet population.

Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin was braced for another German attempt on Moscow in 1942, but Hitler had a different idea. The summer offensive would be aimed instead at the southern USSR, especially the oil fields in the Caucasus.

The Soviet supply line along the Volga River would be a secondary objective. Stalingrad—situated on the Volga River, 566 miles southeast of Moscow—was a large industrial city but of limited strategic significance. A German

general said later that in June 1942, Stalingrad had been “no more than a name on a map.”

The summer offensive was barely underway when Hitler changed the plan. In July, convinced that the Red Army was on the verge of collapse and that the Germans could seize the Volga easily, Hitler split his southern army group in two and shifted the priority to the advance on Stalingrad.

There was nothing to suggest that the biggest battle in the history of warfare would be fought there with the highest casualties ever recorded: combined losses of more than two million killed, wounded, or captured.

The battle for Stalingrad would rage on for 163 days, from August 1942 to February 1943, before the German Sixth Army, encircled and besieged, was forced to surrender. It was the turning point of the war on the critical Eastern front of World War II in Europe. The Germans lost the strategic initiative and they never regained it.

HITLER LOOKS SOUTH

Despite the substantial casualties in the Moscow campaign in 1941, German forces on the Eastern front in 1942 had 2.5 million troops, deployed as Army Groups North,

Top: Soviet soldiers fight at Stalingrad. Inset: Adolf Hitler and Luftwaffe commander Hermann Goering. Hitler accepted Goering's assurances that German airlift could amply supply the troops at Stalingrad. It could not.

Center, and South. The northern wing had Leningrad under siege and the central group was opposite Moscow, facing the main strength of the Red Army.

Casualties mounted through the spring in fighting in the Ukraine and Crimea. With their additional commitments in western Europe and the Mediterranean, the Germans were hard-pressed for reinforcements in the east and had to look to Romanian, Hungarian, and Italian divisions. These forces, less reliable than regular German divisions, were mostly assigned to duties on the flanks and in the rear.

The German summer offensive, designated Operation Blau or “Blue,” was to be led by Army Group South with the main drive toward the oil-rich Caucasus. The oil fields at Maikop, Baku, and Grozny produced 80 percent of the Soviet Union's petroleum. Their capture would be a hard blow to Red Army sustainability. It would also solve Germany's own dire need for petroleum.

Less than a month after Operation Blau began, Hitler dismissed the commander of Army Group South, divided it into two smaller groups, and rewrote the orders. Group A would press on toward the Caucasus. Army Group B—now the main effort—would “thrust forward to Stalingrad to

smash the enemy forces concentrating there, to occupy the town, and to block the land communications between the Don and the Volga [rivers].”

The cutting edge of Army Group B was the Sixth Army, commanded by Lt. Gen. Friedrich von Paulus, formerly a staff officer of considerable ability who had never before led combat troops in battle. He would be supported by Luftwaffe Air Fleet IV, commanded by Gen. Wolfram von Richthofen, a cousin of the legendary “Red Baron” of World War I.

Farther to the south, Army Group A enjoyed initial success, taking the small oil field at Maikop and on Aug. 21 raising the German flag on Mount Elbrus, the highest peak in the Caucasus. That marked the deepest extent of Germany's penetration of Soviet territory in World War II.

Stalin called upon the USSR's best soldier, Gen. Georgy K. Zhukov, to direct the overall Soviet defense and counteroffensive. Gen. Andrey I. Yeremenko was given command of the newly formed Stalingrad front. The primary defense of the city was assigned to the Sixty-Second Army under Gen. Vasily I. Chuikov.

In the Soviet system of dual authority, political commissars shared in the making of military decisions. Throughout the battle of Stalingrad, Yeremenko and Chuikov had the able support of political commissar Nikita Khrushchev, who went on to become leader of the Soviet Union in the 1950s, after the death of Stalin.

FROM THE DON TO THE VOLGA

The arena for the offensive was the steppes of southern Russia, a vast treeless plain divided by two great rivers, the Don and the Volga, which flowed from north to south.



Panzer II armored vehicles race across the steppe from the Don River to Stalingrad.



German Lt. Gen. Friedrich von Paulus, left, and aides after their surrender to Soviet forces in Stalingrad.



A Ju 52 transport aircraft makes a successful sortie over terrain covered in deep snow. In the battle for Stalingrad, the Germans dropped supplies from the air for their encircled and doomed Sixth Army.

By late July, the Sixth Army was on the upper Don, but advancement was hampered by a shortage of fuel. It was not until Aug. 21 that the Germans pushed forward from their bridgehead on the eastward bulge of the Don. At that point, the rivers reached their closest proximity, separated by about 40 miles.

The panzers led the attack and were on the outskirts of Stalingrad on Aug. 23, which is generally regarded as the beginning of the battle. The Luftwaffe carpet-bombed the city and swept aside the Soviet air force, the Voenno-Vozdushnye Sily (VVS).

Stalingrad, with 500,000 inhabitants, was on the west bank of the Volga. It had an unusual shape, 30 miles long but only five miles deep. The old town was in the southern part and a modern city section was in the middle. In the north were three huge factories: the Barrikady ordnance works, the Red October steel plant, and the Dzerzhinsky tractor factory, which had been converted to produce T-34 tanks.

There was little development on the eastern bank of the Volga because the river was a mile wide at that point. That provided a measure of security for Chuikov's command post and logistics facilities set up on that side, as well as for the artillery firing from there on the German second echelon.

The city, previously known as Tsaritsyn, was special to Stalin. It was renamed for him in 1925 in recognition of his spirited defense of it against the Cossacks and the White Army in 1918-20 during the Russian Revolution when he was Bolshevik commissar for the vicinity.

Casualty rates on the Eastern front were staggering. Both sides had taken losses in the hundreds of thousands in preliminary engagements through the summer on the steppe and they entered the main battle with reduced strength.

The initial defense of Stalingrad was thin. Zhukov, marshaling his forces for the master stroke to come, used the Sixty-Second Army as live bait to draw the Germans on. He gave Chuikov just enough reinforcements to stave off defeat.

T-34 tanks, so new that they were not yet painted, were driven into battle directly from the assembly line at the Dzerzhinsky plant by the workers who had assembled them. Batteries of 37 mm anti-aircraft guns were operated by young women volunteers who cranked the barrels down to zero elevation to fire at the oncoming panzers.

RATTENKRIEG

Within two weeks, the Germans controlled half of the city, but they were stuck with fighting in a style that favored Chuikov and the Russians. In the confines of Stalingrad, they could not bring their combined arms to bear in their customary blitzkrieg tactics.

The battle degenerated into hundreds of small encounters, building to building, sometimes room to room. The marshalling yards changed hands 14 times in six hours, won finally by the Germans when the last Soviet defender was killed. One sniper shot 224 Germans.

The bombing had turned much of the city into rubble, which worked to the advantage of the outnumbered and outgunned Soviets.

"The close-quarter combat in ruined buildings, bunkers, cellars, and sewers was soon dubbed 'rattenkrieg' ['rat war'] by the German soldiers," said historian Antony J. Beevor.

Most of the civilians were evacuated, but somehow, the city continued to function. The electricity was still on and the factories kept producing tanks and munitions.

By late October, some German battalions were down to 50 men, but the casualties were worse for the Soviets, who had lost the equivalent of seven divisions. Hitler was ebullient. "Where the German soldier sets foot, there he remains," he said. "You may rest assured that nobody will ever drive us away from Stalingrad."

Paulus, ever eager to please, promised Hitler on Oct. 25 that Stalingrad would be taken by Nov. 10. The Sixth Army controlled 90 percent of the city but could not dislodge the Soviets from a few square miles in several strips along the river bank, from which they stubbornly carried on the fight.

Paulus was in more danger than he knew. His force of 22 divisions was in a broad pocket at the tip of a narrow access route stretching back more than 100 miles to supply and support bases beyond the Don. This vulnerable salient was guarded on the flanks by the inept Romanian Third and Fourth armies. Zhukov was ready to spring his trap.

ENCIRCLEMENT

Undetected by German intelligence, Zhukov had been building up forces and stockpiling supplies and munitions. By the middle of November, he had gathered three army groups with a strength of almost a million, along with 1,000 tanks, 1,400 aircraft, and 14,000 guns. His plan was to envelop the Sixth Army in Stalingrad, encircle and destroy the Axis forces on the flanks, and cut off German Army Group A in the Caucasus.

Zhukov struck the northern flank at dawn on Nov. 19 and tore a 50-mile gap in the salient. Next day, he hit the southern flank with similar results. The encirclement was complete Nov. 21, with most of the Romanians in the two field armies dead or captured.

Paulus was penned up in a pocket 30 miles long and 20 miles wide with about 250,000 German troops and remnants of the Romanian divisions. He was 385 miles from his main supply base at Millerovo and 100 miles from the nearest German forces.

Army Group Don was formed Nov. 27 under Field Marshal



Nikita Khrushchev (left) and other Soviet Communist Party and military members—Gen. Alexi Kirichenko, Alexi Chuyanov, and Gen. Andrei Yeryomenko—study a map.

Erich von Manstein as the Germans sought to salvage what they could from the situation and relieve the siege.

If Paulus had started promptly, he probably could have broken out of the pocket to link up with Manstein, but Hitler would not hear of it. "Sixth Army will stay where it is," he declared. "It is the garrison of a fortress, and the duty of fortress troops is to withstand sieges. If necessary they will hold out all winter, and I shall relieve them by a spring offensive."

Accounts vary—some of them written after the war when participants were protecting their reputations—but Manstein claimed that he had given orders for an attempted breakout. Paulus was obedient to Hitler and refused to make the effort.

In any case, Hitler and his inner circle believed that until the encirclement could be broken, the forces in the pocket could be sustained by the Luftwaffe with an airlift.

AIRLIFT

At his mountain retreat at Berchtesgaden Nov. 20, Hitler reacted to news of Zhukov's attack the previous day. Luftwaffe commander Hermann Goering was not there so Hitler asked Gen. Hans Jeschonnek, the Luftwaffe chief of staff, whether Stalingrad could be supplied by air. Jeschonnek replied without thinking it through. He told Hitler that airlift could do the job, provided both transport planes and bombers were used.

Jeschonnek soon realized that he had misspoken. Luftwaffe commanders in the field were unanimous in their judgment that what he promised was impossible. However, when Goering arrived, he assured Hitler that an airlift would indeed work, and thereafter Hitler refused to believe anything different. Goering did not involve himself in the details. After his boastful assurance to Hitler, he departed on his luxurious command train for a shopping spree in Paris.

Sixth Army's requirement was for 500 tons of supplies a day. The absolute minimum was 300 tons, which called for 150 fully laden Ju 52s landing in the pocket. Because of weather, the aircraft would not always be able to fly, so to keep up the average, the Luftwaffe would have to deliver at least about 500 tons on each good-weather day.

The entire Luftwaffe had only some 700 Ju 52s, and more than half of them were committed elsewhere. A landing in Tunisia between November 1942 and January 1943 siphoned off 250 of them. Transport aircraft, with a repair and refit priority below that of combat units, had an operational readiness rate between 20 percent and 40 percent. The Luftwaffe did not have nearly enough Ju 52s to meet the Sixth Army's needs.



A Soviet soldier waves the Red Banner over the central plaza of Stalingrad in 1943.



A wounded German prisoner of war, left, is taken at the Battle of Stalingrad.

The Luftwaffe stripped the training program of aircraft and pilots and converted long-range transports and medium bombers, notably He 111s, for transport duty, but the combination could not meet the 500-ton requirement, or even 300.

During the seven weeks of the airlift, the Luftwaffe delivered an average of 117.6 tons of rations, fuel, and ammunition per day, and substantially less than that at the end, when some of the supplies were airdropped rather than landed.

The main base for the Ju 52s was at Tatsinskaya, about 160 miles west of Stalingrad, and the He 111s flew from Morozovskaya, which was a little closer. Inside the pocket, they used half a dozen landing fields, of which only one was equipped to handle large operations. During the airlift, 266 Ju 52s and 165 He 111s were lost to Soviet fighters and flak, others to accidents on the cratered and snow-clogged airstrips.

SURRENDER

Zhukov poured more troops into the battle and steadily tightened his pressure on the pocket. Radio Moscow broadcast the message that “every seven seconds, a German soldier dies in Russia.”

In December, Manstein’s Army Group Don drew within 30 miles of the perimeter, but Paulus would not move. Manstein was driven back by Zhukov’s counterattack on Dec. 22. As the Soviets advanced, the Luftwaffe abandoned Tatsinskaya and Morozovskaya. The Ju 52s fell back to Salsk.

The airstrips in the pocket were overrun, one by one, in January, and the Sixth Army was left short of everything, including food. Hitler vehemently rejected any notion of surrender.

The Soviets split the Sixth Army into two parts on Jan. 26. Paulus, with the southern part, set up headquarters in a basement

beneath a department store on Red Square in Stalingrad. On Jan. 31, Hitler promoted Paulus to field marshal. No German field marshal had ever surrendered. Hitler expected that Paulus would commit suicide rather than give up, thereby preserving German honor as Hitler understood it.

To Hitler’s fury, Paulus surrendered the same day, although in a roundabout way. His chief of staff negotiated the arrangements with a Russian officer while Paulus remained in an adjoining room. Marched away into captivity, Paulus claimed that he had not surrendered; he had been taken prisoner. Gen. Karl Strecker surrendered the northern half of Sixth Army Feb. 2.

Of the 249,000 Germans and Axis allies inside the pocket in December, 42,000 sick and wounded—along with specialists the Germans could not afford to lose—had been flown out. Some 85,000 others were killed, and many had been captured individually or in groups. Of the 91,000 who surrendered at the end of the battle in February, most died in forced marches across Russia or in prison camps. Only some 5,000 ever returned to Germany, and that was years later.

Paulus, denounced by Hitler as a traitor, was a strange case. In August 1944, he signed an appeal for Germans on the Eastern front to surrender. In 1946, he was brought to the Nuremberg trials to testify against the Nazi leaders. He was held in Russia until his release in 1953, after which he lived in Dresden in communist East Germany. He died in 1957, still trying to explain himself to anyone who would listen.

THE HERO CITY

No one knows for sure what the total casualties were for the Stalingrad campaign. The numbers in official reports of killed, wounded, and captured are unreliable and in conflict with each other. It is not always clear what is being counted and some claims are transparently spurious.

Estimates range from a low of about two million—850,000 Axis and 1,130,000 Soviet—to a high of four million—1.5 million for Germany and its allies and 2.5 million for the Soviets. There is no record of how many civilians were killed and injured.

The effort to take the oil fields failed. Army Group A barely managed to escape from the Caucasus with the Red Army fast closing in behind. The strategic initiative passed to the Soviets and the Germans began their long retreat, leading up to the fall of Berlin in 1945.

“Stalingrad was the turning point in the war on the Eastern front and the Eastern front was the main front of the Second World War,” said historian Geoffrey Roberts. “More than 80 percent of all combat during the Second World War took place on the Eastern front.”

Medals were awarded to all 707,000 surviving Russians who had taken part in the battle. In 1945, Stalingrad was designated a “hero city” of the Soviet Union.

In 1961, during Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization program, Stalingrad was renamed Volgograd, but in 2004, President Vladimir Putin had the hero city plaque in the Kremlin modified to again read “Stalingrad.”

In 2013, the Volgograd city council voted to use the name “Stalingrad” on six commemorative days, including Feb. 2, when the last Germans in the pocket surrendered in 1943, and May 9, on which Russians observe the victory in Europe in 1945. ❖

John T. Correll was editor in chief of *Air Force Magazine* for 18 years and is now a contributor. His most recent article, “Last Tango in Potsdam,” appeared in the September issue.