

Not a Step Back

Leanne Crain
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“Such talk [of retreat] is lying and harmful, it weakens us and strengthens the enemy, because if there is no end to the retreat, we will be left with no bread, no fuel, no metals, no raw materials, no enterprises, no factories, and no railways. It follows from this that it is time to finish with retreat. Not a step back!”

-Order No.227¹

German Field Marshal Frederich Paulus surrendered his remaining exhausted and starved troops of the Sixth Army on January 31, 1943 in Stalingrad. The culmination of just over five months of intense fighting within the ruins of the sprawling city that sat against the banks of the Volga River. Operation Barbarossa, the German invasion of the Soviet Union, began in late June 1941, but by the time of Paulus’s surrender, the German army had been dealt a blow from which it would never recover. Though Operation Barbarossa was initially successful, Hitler and his commanders had vastly underestimated Russia. They believed, based upon the Russian defeat of the Winter War against Finland, that Russia would be easily conquered and that the “Bolshevik tyranny” would crumble, but this was shown to be a fallacy.² The Russians held tactical advantages with sharp minds of the remaining high level military officials, the people’s knowledge of how to deal with their particular climate, and the vast number of human resources that could be called up. The Russian forces fought with desperation in the aptly named “meat grinder” of Stalingrad due to a mix of patriotic fervor, stirred up by Stalin to inspire his troops into fighting for their homeland, and the grim knowledge of both Order No. 227 – the infamous ‘Not a Step Back’ order – and the wholesale mass extermination of Soviet party members and civilians in German occupied areas. It was German overconfidence, and the Russians’ tactical advantages, luck, and fear that enabled the Battle of Stalingrad to slow and eventually stop the German advance into Russia, and turn the course of the war.

The beginning of the war in Russia came as a surprise to the Soviet government, even though they had been repeatedly warned by other countries that Nazi Germany was planning an attack on Russia, and nearly the entire first year of the German advance into Russia was met with disorganization and reactionary planning. Hitler, and indeed, most of the top military minds in Germany, had every right to feel confident in their troops. The Germans had swept across Europe, not meeting a single failure aside from the stubborn refusal of the British to cease any hostilities, and they had seen how the Soviets had failed spectacularly in their rushed invasion of Finland in the winter of 1939. The Germans had the utmost faith in their army and the success of their *blitzkrieg* strategy against their enemies further bolstered that faith as the Germans moved inexorably through the Ukraine and into Russian territory nearly uncontested. The Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact had kept Germany safe from any attack from Russia, but Hitler had already planned for the eventuality of invading Russia with Operation Barbarossa. Hitler was convinced that the communist regime was on the verge of collapse, and that the oppressed people under Stalin would welcome the Germans as liberators, but at the same time, the Germans looked at those same oppressed people as sub-human, fit only for slave labor.

There was also a practical reason for invading Russia in 1941, and that was that after the disastrous results Winter War, Stalin had initiated the largest mass promotion of officers in history in 1940 and had begun the rapid industrialization of the Red Army. Hitler would not want to face a stronger armed force if he delayed the invasion further.³ The confidence of the German Army of being able to easily invade Russia before winter set in had echoes of World War I overconfidence that the troops would ‘be home by Christmas.’ With the utmost confidence in German superiority, Hitler began Operation Barbarossa on June 22, 1941, and the Germans advanced quickly through Russian territory, fueling their confidence. The early days of the war in Russia were marked by brutality and ruthlessness on the part of both armies. German SS teams moved in behind the front lines, and began the process of mass murder of Communist Party members, along with any suspected Party members and suspected Jews and POWs, as they were not covered by the Geneva or Hauge Conventions.⁴ The Russians resorted back to a scorched-earth policy, one bent on leaving the Germans nothing to gain, and the extent of the destruction of their own resources shocked the Germans, who had hoped to use the raw materials and already functioning factories to further provide for war production and domestic consumer demands.⁵ The overconfidence and brutality of the German Army would prove to be a source of tactical advantage and luck for the Russians.

The war had stalled during the winter of 1941, but by summer, the press towards the Caucasus region and the rich oil fields was moving again, even though

the morale of the German Army had begun to waver in the face of their inability to topple Russia and capture Moscow within a few months. It was at this point that the unassuming city of Stalingrad became a target. Stalin, after having learned his own failings, began to rely more on the Stavka, which had been filled with the generals that Stalin felt to be trustworthy, and just before the Battle of Stalingrad began, there was a change in the chief of General Staff to General Aleksandr Vasilevsky, who seemed to have a more rational and calming influence on Stalin than Marshal Gregory Zhukov, and with the addition of General Semyon Timoshenko, the Stavka began preparing to attempt to stop the German advance.⁶

Though Stalin, via the Stavka, had issued Order No. 270 in August 1941, ordering the formation of 'blocking' defensive units to stop the massive retreats of the Red Army, he went a step further in July 1942 with the issue of Order No. 227, which became characterized by its Draconian orders of 'Not a step back.' This order detailed what Stalin and the Stavka saw as the main points plaguing the Soviet armed forces, which was desertion and thoughts of retreat with the argument that Russia had more than enough territory to maintain for a long time. It would also form penal battalions, which would be sent to the most dangerous sections of the front lines so that these offenders could repay their cowardice and desertion of their country with blood. In a calculated move, Stalin did not have the orders published, knowing that if a copy fell into German hands, and it would turn into propaganda against him and further demoralize his troops. It was distributed verbally, to be read aloud to the armed forces.⁷

By 1942, the brutality of the German Army towards Russian POWs and civilians was known throughout the ranks, and it left the Red Army little choice to either face the guns of the Germans or face the guns of their own countrymen, as the blocking units were fully authorized to shoot any deserters. Order 227 could have been a massive blunder, on par with Stalin's early purges of military and tactical leaders in the late 1930s, but it was his ability to coach the order into patriotic, nationalist language and the force of his personality that made this order more of a morale builder and bolstered the troops for a long, hard fight.⁸ It is conceivable that the members of the Russian army would think that they were dead either way, knowing that they would be shown no mercy from the Germans and knowing that measures had been implemented on their own side of shooting deserters, and this would prove a source for their tenaciousness and forcefulness in the fighting that was to come at Stalingrad.

The Battle of Stalingrad began with the bombing of the city by the *Luftwaffe* on August 23, 1942, killing thousands of civilians. Soviet claims were that over forty thousand people had been killed, but those numbers are unsubstantiated, and the city was left in ruins. Though Stalin had refused initially to order the evacuation of

the civilian population, arguing that the defenders would defend a living city rather than an empty one, thousands of refugees from the city waited for ferries and ships to take them across the Volga in the aftermath of the initial bombing.⁹ The bombing had ignited fires throughout the city, and though the city seemed gutted and ripe for conquest by the Fourth Panzer and Sixth Armies, the Russian defenders refused to surrender, and the Germans would have to capture every bit of the city in order to succeed. The buildings of Stalingrad, built during the early Soviet years and made of reinforced concrete, had roofs and windows blown out, floors collapsed and burned from the bombs, but many of the buildings were still standing and could take further bombings due to their construction and the ease with which the pressure waves from a bomb would dissipate within the buildings. The buildings that did collapse did so within their own footprint, keeping destruction to a minimum for neighboring buildings, and the rubble and skeletonized building ruins were perfect for the guerilla warfare and sniping that would become Stalingrad's legacy.¹⁰ Before the battle, the heavy artillery of the Red Army had been moved across the Volga and established along the banks of the river, where they were able to easily aim at targets within the city. Within months, the Germans had almost complete control of the city, but the city was not taken totally.

General Vasily Chuikov, an independent thinker and determined fighter, was appointed to command the 62nd Army two weeks after the battle had begun. His task was the monumental one of preventing the city from falling into German hands, and his unconventional methods worked within the ruined city. He provided morale for his troops by keeping his headquarters within the city and only going across the Volga for reports and inspection of the heavy artillery, but he also provided the grim reminder with his claim that for the 62nd Army, there was "no land across the Volga," indicating that they would either keep the city or die there.¹¹ The luck for the Russians came with Chuikov, who ordered No Man's Land be reduced ideally to zero and he ordered his troops to 'hug' the German lines, forcing the *Luftwaffe* into the friendly fire decision of dropping bombs onto their own troops, along with the Russians.

Chuikov fully believed in the spirit of Order No. 227, as he had either guessed or been told of plans of a massive counter-offensive by September 1942, and he believed that one sector would suffer while offensives could be planned in others, and it was simply his sector being picked for the brunt of the suffering.¹² Many regiments that were sent into Stalingrad's urban warfare also displayed that belief, most notably Rodimtsev's nearly annihilated 13th Regiment. Out of the ten thousand men it started with, only three hundred twenty men survived the battle, and the regiment was renamed a Guards unit. To be renamed as such was a high honor, one that had been earned with blood, even as it invoked images of the former tsarist regime.¹³ There were an

additional seven other regiments that suffered the same fate of near total casualties, most all of whom were also renamed Guards units.

A detachment of Rodimtsev's 13th Regiment was led by a man named Jacob Pavlov whose task was to secure a location within the center of the city. With the help of a few surviving members of his squad, Pavlov took control of an L-shaped apartment block in central Stalingrad, one that could defend a section of the Volga River. It also afforded the defenders a wide field of sight, about one kilometer to the north, south, and west. The house became known as *Dom Pavlov* – Pavlov's House. On German maps it was labeled as a fortress, as Pavlov and his men had either discovered or installed an anti-tank rifle on the roof, and protected their location further with the assignment of a sniper on the roof and sowing mines and barbed wire around the apartment building, along with digging communication trenches to stay in contact with the other Russian forces.¹⁴ From their vantage point, they could strike at the Panzers with impunity. They were not only a symbol of the resistance against the Germans, but they were also proven deadly. The Germans would routinely attempt to take the house almost daily, only to fail every time. Pavlov's House stood for fifty-eight days, until the defenders and the civilians found hiding in the basement were finally relieved in November.¹⁵

Chuikov's street fighting army flummoxed the German army, and letters and reports reflected the German distaste for this dirty method of warfare. Their complaints were that they controlled the kitchen, but were left fighting for the bedroom, and they called this the *Rattenkrieg* – the War of the Rats, displaying their contempt for their Russian adversaries who fought excessively for each piece of ground that could be lost or gained. The *Rattenkrieg* that the Germans complained so bitterly about became the haven of sniper warfare, snipers able to take residence in various positions through the city and strike at their enemies quickly. Here too, the element of luck came into play with a literal war of rats slowing the Panzer tanks to a halt. The tanks, especially as the weather became colder, became infested with rats, who were apt to chew on the sensitive electrical systems, rendering the tanks useless.¹⁶ Some of the defenders were also fortunate to have anti-tank guns, as was the case with Pavlov's House, but the tanks had been mostly taken out of the battle due to the close quarters combat, the rubble in some of the streets, and by rats. The remaining Panzers would be rendered useless by the coming winter.

Winter in Russia is an inevitability. Even as the German troops began to move into Stalingrad in August, summer would be giving way to a quick autumn, and then to the depths of winter in short order. Many people believe that it was the winter that brought the German army to a grinding halt, when in reality it was more the final straw for troops far from home, equipped only with summer gear and ill-prepared for the eventual onset

of their second winter. German soldiers would pillage anything they could to try to stay warm, from women's ski pants to bits of cloth they could wrap over their faces to protect their noses and lips from the cold, as frostbite was a deadly concern. As a contrast, the Russians were able to receive supplies quickly from across the Volga, including warmer clothing that would better blend in with their surroundings.

However, with the swift giveaway from fall to winter, the issues of supply began plaguing the Russian forces as well as the Volga began to have ice floes drifting downstream. Their ferries, which supplied the troops with ammunition, troops, and food usually operated at night, but with ice in the river, it became too dangerous to attempt to cross. Until the river could freeze, the troops at Stalingrad had been cut off from their supplies across the river. Though Chuikov joked that his troops had enough rations for two weeks in the form of chocolate, the main cause for concern would be the lack of ammunition, fresh troops, and communication with the heavy artillery batteries across the river.¹⁷ Supplying a battlefield is difficult enough even in nearly perfect conditions, but until the Volga was frozen over, there were many miscommunications with the heavy artillery across the river. These miscommunications on the part of the Russians seemed to be the luck the German Army needed to try and finally take the city, and it began its last major offensive into Stalingrad in the early days of November. The offensive lasted less than a day, and the Germans had little ground to show for their efforts by November 12. The Russian counter offensive would be launched eight days later, having been planned in secret with a program of intentional misinformation. The perception of the Germans was that the Russians had not learned from their mistakes at the beginning of Operation Barbarossa, mistakes that had cost Russia territory and manpower.¹⁸

The tactical planning of the defense of Russia had initially been haphazard, Stalin believing he could perform the duties of Supreme Commander, but he was eventually persuaded to heed the advice brought to him by senior military commanders. Whereas Hitler seemed to invest more and more of himself personally within the Battle for Stalingrad, as the prestige of taking a city that bore the name of his enemy would be a direct blow against Stalin, break the confidence of the Russian people, scatter the Russian defenses, and open the oil-rich Caucasus region for his war time efforts. Hitler's orders to Paulus within Stalingrad seemed to reflect the increasing personal stake and obsession with the city, and also reflected the overconfidence in the might of the German Army. Paulus was ordered to fight to the last man, even as winter set in, and even after his army had been encircled and trapped within the city by November 22.¹⁹

This tactical error coming from the German High Command was to prove fatal for many German soldiers, and without this overconfidence, the Russian

encirclement could have been broken through by Field Marshal Manstien, providing the German soldiers with relief, supplies, and a way out of the city. Hitler had been assured by Hermann Goering that the *Luftwaffe* could airlift and provide supplies for the trapped Sixth Army, but this claim was to be proven false. The amount of supplies the Germans needed within the *Kessel* – the Cauldron – was almost eight hundred tons per day, but the *Luftwaffe* only had the capability to carry around half of that, as several of the needed planes were diverted to North Africa to provide fighting cover. With Manstien and Paulus hampered by orders to maintain their positions instead of fighting to merge together, the Soviet forces had time to strengthen their forces around Stalingrad, and it would only be a matter of time before the Germans would be crushed within their cauldron. Though the second phase of the Soviet counter-offensive stalled and only met with limited success

By January 1943, starvation, disease, and the cold were beginning to take a heavy toll among the German army while still being harassed by the encircling Soviet forces. It is estimated that between the encirclement of the *Kessel* and January 7, over fifty thousand German troops died from not only fighting, but the other conditions within the city. Towards the end of the battle, requests for permission to surrender were repeatedly denied by Hitler, who believed that if there were reports of a heroic sacrifice by the Sixth Army, that it would inspire the remainder of his troops along the Eastern Front into rallying around the memory of the Sixth Army. Hitler had promoted Paulus to Field Marshal, on the assumption Paulus would commit suicide instead of being captured, as no German of that rank had ever surrendered. However, that promotion came just before Paulus had allowed himself to be captured by Soviet forces within the remains of the city he had failed to take on January 31. The last German resistance in the city surrendered two days later, and the Battle of Stalingrad had finally ended after five months. The tide of the Eastern Front was beginning to turn against the Germans and there seemed to be little doubt that the Russians would push all the way to Berlin in their quest for vengeance for the invasion of their country and the mass extermination of their countrymen.²⁰

The Battle for Stalingrad was a long, drawn out battle of attrition, one that the Germans had initially thought they would never be drawn into. The overconfidence in the tactic of *blitzkrieg*, the strength of the German army, and Russian unpreparedness and weakness would be the very thing that began to turn the tide of World War Two against Germany. Stalin, though caught unprepared for the speed at which the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact was violated, proved his ability to learn from his mistakes and listen to more militaristic minds when it came to planning resistance. Stalin had also dispensed with ideology for the war time years and used a tactic of nationalistic pride to stir up patriotic fervor for the war effort, but also used

Draconian orders to ensure discipline within the armed forces. Order No. 227 was enacted as a measure to cease any form of retreat and to boost the morale of those inclined to heroism to fight to the death for every inch of Russian territory. By the time of the Battle of Stalingrad, the grim knowledge of the mass killings behind German lines provided Russian troops with the options of dying on the battlefield, dying at the hands of the Germans, either in concentration camps such as Auschwitz or executed by SS troops that followed the front line, or being executed by their own countrymen left Russian troops little choice as to their fate. Luck and tactics went hand in hand, Chuikov's spontaneous tactics employed by his troops matching up with strokes of luck, such as the river freezing quickly at the onset of winter, the city's buildings standing up to the bombs of the *Luftwaffe* and providing cover for the guerrilla warfare the Germans called the *Rattenkrieg*. Tenacious fighters, such as Pavlov's squadron or the Siberian detachment of the 187th Rifle Division that fought for a riverfront factory, were the norm rather than the exception during the Battle of Stalingrad. The German advance into Russia was stopped by the city that lay upon the banks of the Volga, a point of pride to both Stalin and Hitler, the overconfidence of the German army, luck and the Russian defenders that fought a bloody battle out of nationalistic sentiment and fear, using tactics suited uniquely to Russia.

Notes

- ¹ Geoffrey Roberts, *Victory at Stalingrad: The Battle That Changed History* (Harlow: Longman, 2002), 204-5.
- ² Michael Bitter, "Russia and World War Two" (Lecture, University of Hawaii at Hilo, Hilo, HI, April 30, 2015).
- ³ Walter Boardman Kerr, *The Russian Army: Its Men, Its Leaders and Its Battles* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1944), 150 & Bitter, "Russia and World War Two."
- ⁴ Bitter, "Russia and World War Two" & Roberts, *Victory at Stalingrad*, 68.
- ⁵ David M. Glantz and Jonathan M. House. *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 72.
- ⁶ Glantz and House, *When Titans Clashed*, 129.
- ⁷ Roberts, *Victory at Stalingrad*, 203-210.
- ⁸ Roberts, *Victory at Stalingrad*, 65-8.
- ⁹ Roberts, *Victory at Stalingrad*, 77.
- ¹⁰ "Battle of Stalingrad | Battlefield Detectives Documentary," YouTube, Accessed March 19, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=61eYOpEF7hk>.

- ¹¹ Roberts, *Victory at Stalingrad*, 87 & Mike Yoder, "Military History Online - Battle of Stalingrad," Military History Online - Battle of Stalingrad, Accessed March 19, 2015, <http://www.militaryhistoryonline.com/wwii/stalingrad/>.
- ¹² Kerr, *The Russian Army*, 197.
- ¹³ Bitter, "Russia and World War Two".
- ¹⁴ Mike Yoder, Military History Online & "Дом Павлова," *Volfoto.ru*, Web, April 09, 2015. http://www.volfoto.ru/volgograd/ploschad_lenina/dom_pavlova/.
- ¹⁵ Roberts, *Victory at Stalingrad*, 97 & William Craig, *Enemy at the Gates: The Battle for Stalingrad* (New York: Reader's Digest Press, 1973), 146.
- ¹⁶ "Battle of Stalingrad | Battlefield Detectives Documentary" & "Crucial WW2 Battle Remembered," Crucial WW2 Battle Remembered, Accessed April 09, 2015, http://web.archive.org/web/20090309114524/http://russiatoday.com/Top_News/2009-02-02/Crucial_WW2_battle_remembered.html.
- ¹⁷ Craig, *Enemy at the Gates*, 168 & Kerr, *The Russian Army*, 201.
- ¹⁸ Alexander Werth, *Russia at War, 1941-1945*, (New York: Dutton, 1964), 470-1 & Glantz and House, *When Titans Clashed*, 133.
- ¹⁹ Kerr, *The Russian Army*, 207.
- ²⁰ Roberts, *Victory at Stalingrad*, 130-4.
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