

WW2 HISTORY.COM

Stalingrad A-Level Extension Task (Part 2)

1. Stalingrad

LAURENCE REES: Why do you think the major German advance in 1942 failed at Stalingrad?

ANTONY BEEVOR: For a start it was almost like the Tolstoy short story of 'how much land does a man need?' Hitler kept on increasing the scope of the campaign, he started off by saying on the 1st of June 1942 that 'if we don't capture the oil fields in the Caucuses I might as well close the war', so for him the vital objective was the Caucuses. But then he became distracted, he tried to change the plan halfway through and wanted the two parts of the operation which were going to be run in sequence to take place together, and as a result they did not have sufficient strength for all of their objectives. The whole of Army Group A was to capture the whole of the Caucuses while Army Group B, which was principally the 6th Army under General Paulus, was to advance towards Stalingrad. Not, to begin with, to capture it, but instead to destroy the weapons factories and everything like that, and also secure that particular flank. Later, when he realised that the campaign in the Caucuses was simply running out of steam, that the size and the scope of the whole landscape was so huge that he simply did not have enough men to follow it through and resistance was becoming stronger from the Soviet armies, Stalingrad, which had never featured really on the operational plan for Operation Blue, suddenly became an ersatz victory. He was not achieving what he wanted from the Caucuses and so the 6th Army was ordered to capture Stalingrad, and this was where his obsession with the city that bore Stalin's name became a trap. It was the bait, and it's always a great disaster in war when a commander becomes obsessed with a particular objective and he loses sight of the wider picture.

LAURENCE REES: So even if Hitler hadn't made the decision to split his forces, this was going to end badly?

ANTONY BEEVOR: It was almost certainly going to end badly simply because of the huge spaces involved, and the logistical problems of resupplying all of these particular armies. But his major mistake was completely underestimating the Red Army. When he informed Field Marshal List in the Caucuses that his new objectives were to take the whole of the eastern seaboard of the Black Sea and the Caucuses with just 2 armies, List could hardly believe the order when he received it, and he thought Hitler must have secret intelligence which he know

nothing of which confirmed that the Red Army had as good as collapsed. But they weren't actually seeing any evidence of this.

LAURENCE REES: And yet in the early days, Operation Blue was successful because the Germans were capturing enormous amounts of territory. But were they partly successful because the Russian technique was simply not to fight them?

ANTONY BEEVOR: Well, Russian technique had changed in two ways. The first part of Operation Blue was an attack on Voronezh, and they found that the Soviets were actually able to defend Voronezh with desperate ferocity and courage, and for the first time one saw them using cities as major defensive positions, and that gave them a huge advantage. The great advantage of mechanisation and aerial power, which the Germans had, tended to be lost in city fighting; and the other change was that Stalin had at last given permission to his commanders to pull back to avoid encirclement. There's a slight paradox, because he'd just issued Order No.272 saying that anybody who retreated was to be executed, but at the same time he allowed retreat, and that made all the difference in avoiding these encirclements which had happened the year before.

LAURENCE REES: And there was another change wasn't there? That Stalin now give his military commanders more freedom to use their initiative?

ANTONY BEEVOR: Well, Stalin was much more of a realist than Hitler. What's interesting is that Stalin had been a total disaster in 1941, refusing to believe the intelligence and the warnings of Operation Barbarossa. At the beginning of Operation Blue one has to remember that he was convinced that the attack was still going to come towards Moscow. When, for example, German orders were captured by the Russians Stalin refused to believe he had the German plans in front of him. They were actually put on his desk and he just chucked them away and refused to acknowledge them. But I think that the point was that Stalin had realised what mistakes he'd made. Hitler refused to acknowledge any mistakes, but Stalin realised the mistakes he'd made and that's when he started to listen to his generals, and that is why Stalingrad was not just a turning point psychologically in the war, it was a real turning point in the handling of Soviet Armies. It was also a turning point in the confidence of Soviet generals being able to face up to Stalin a little bit more, and also have less fear of the NKVD, and I think that this is a very important thing. Beria used to threaten generals in the crudest way possible, but generals were now realising that in fact they were starting to get more of a whip hand because of the desperate situation.

LAURENCE REES: Would you say the battle for Stalingrad was a close run thing?

ANTONY BEEVOR: It was a very close run battle for the city, but even if the Germans had occupied the whole of the west bank of the Volga at Stalingrad that still wouldn't have signified a major victory in German terms, apart from having reached the symbolic Astrakhan/Archangel line - which Hitler had always defined as his ultimate objective. A lot of the German troops there thought: 'We've made it! Here we are on the Volga! It's the end of the

war! But they didn't realise that there was a huge steppe beyond and the Russians could have gone on retreating to the Urals if necessary. The point about Stalingrad really was that it was the perfect trap, and by focusing all of the efforts of the 6th Army there it allowed the weak flanks manned by the two Romanian Armies on either side of the 6th Army to be the perfect objectives for an encirclement operation, which the Germans never believed the Red Army was capable of mounting.

2. Chuikov and Paulus

LAURENCE REES: How would you compare and contrast the different approaches of Chuikov, the Soviet Commander, and Paulus, the German Commander, to the battle of Stalingrad?

ANTONY BEEVOR: Paulus was a weak character in many ways. He was a brilliant staff officer, which everybody has acknowledged, but he was also a huge admirer of Hitler, and actually at the very first battle of Kharkov Paulus had feared that the battle was lost and Hitler had insisted on an attack. In fact it wasn't Hitler's plan, but he immediately spotted the opportunity. Paulus realised that Hitler had been right and he'd been wrong and so therefore he followed everything that Hitler told him slavishly. The biggest mistake he made was to follow Hitler's orders of throwing tank crews into the street fighting in Stalingrad in October in a last desperate effort to capture the town before winter came, and this was the real disaster, because there were already indications and hints through intelligence that the Russians were preparing a counteroffensive. If he had kept some of his tank divisions back from the city as a counteroffensive striking force then there's a distinct possibility that the Soviet encirclement may not have worked, but he didn't. And that was why when the encirclement came they had no forces capable of preventing it.

3. Chuikov

LAURENCE REES: And on the other hand you have this extraordinary Soviet commander - Chuikov. And from reading your book, it seems that it was by sheer force of will that he managed to hold Stalingrad?

ANTONY BEEVOR: Chuikov sensed the situation very clearly. There was the famous interview, whether it's apocryphal or not one doesn't know, with Khrushchev, who was the chief political officer of the Stalingrad Front, and Chuikov. Khrushchev basically said to him 'do you understand your duties?' And Chuikov knew perfectly well what they were, i.e. he could shoot as many men as he wanted, he could do anything that he wanted including order the NKVD rifle battalions into the attack, which was totally unprecedented. So he knew he had carte blanche - but his life depended basically on holding Stalingrad. Chuikov was certainly physically a brave man and he was also, I think, probably morally courageous. He was utterly brutal, and famous for smashing his own officers in the face if he disagreed with them or he felt that they were in some ways not performing properly. So he was, shall we say, quite a force.

LAURENCE REES: So how crucial then was his leadership in influencing the outcome of the battle for Stalingrad?

ANTONY BEEVOR: Oh, I think Chuikov's leadership was essential. I'm now talking about the fight for the city. Where Chuikov felt betrayed, if you like, and I think he was always bitter and angry afterwards, was that he was never told to what degree he was being left there as the bait in the trap. He was being given just enough troops to hold on, but not actually to win the battle within Stalingrad, because all the spare reserves were actually being built up behind the lines for these two massive pincer movements which were going to surround the whole of the 6th Army.

4. Tactics at Stalingrad

LAURENCE REES: And to what extent did the Romanians let the Germans down?

ANTONY BEEVOR: The weakness of the Romanians was obvious, because they had virtually no anti-tank guns and their command structure was pretty corrupt. All the cement and many of the materials were used for constructing rather luxurious quarters for the officers behind the lines while the men at the Front simply froze in the mud. And the soldiers were very badly treated both by officers and by their own NCO's, so morale was pretty low. But even if they'd had excellent morale, even if they'd been German soldiers, their lack of anti-tank guns meant that when the Soviet tank brigades attacked they were simply incapable of holding them.

LAURENCE REES: So really there was nothing, given the way Paulus had behaved in Stalingrad, that could be done? Once that encirclement happened, it was all over for the Germans?

ANTONY BEEVOR: Once the encirclement happened, and there had been that failure to hold back armoured forces to break the encirclement while it was still happening, they faced this dilemma: do we try to break out immediately while the men still have strength? Because, remember, at this stage the snow was starting to come down. It wasn't yet very thick but it was already difficult, they were short of fuel, and the question was do we wait for more fuel and ammunition before we make our break out or do we try to break out straight away? Well, the answer was that their only chance was right at the beginning before the encirclement was strengthened and really established. But Hitler refused any idea of any break out and Goering persuaded him in the most irresponsible way imaginable that somehow the Luftwaffe would be capable of re-supplying this army a quarter of a million strong. It was preposterous.

TASK: From the list of key reasons why the Germans were defeated at Stalingrad (Part One) find the most compelling evidence from the expert testimony (Part Two) to back them up. Rank the five reasons in terms of importance, or assign them to groups that provide an answer to the overall question.