

## The Eastern Front: The Role of the Russians in Defeating the Axis

Since a fair amount of the information in this paper comes from Winston Churchill's six volumes on World War II it seems only appropriate to start with his first volume, "The Gathering Storm", 1919-1939. The Bolshevik Revolution of November 1917 further weakened Russia and peace terms were consolidated in March 1918. With the massive aid of the United States the Hindenberg Line was breached in September and the Central Powers sued for peace. An Armistice came into effect November 11, 1918.

The Treaty of Versailles was imposed on the Central Powers by the Allies on June 28, 1919. The Allies wanted the losers to pay but the Ottoman and the Austro-Hungarian Empires no longer existed. Under the treaty; Germany lost all her colonies; Lorraine was given to France; Belgium received territories; the Saar was under international administration for fifteen years; and the Rhineland was to be occupied for fifteen years by the Allies at German cost. Millions of ethnic Germans were placed under non-German control. Germany lost 10% of its territories and population which became the new states of Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Lithuania. Heavy reparations were imposed and German armed forces were dramatically reduced. Germany was limited to 100,000 troops and allowed no tanks or aircraft.

When Marshall Foch heard of the signing of the "Peace Treaty" he observed with singular accuracy: "This is not peace. It is an Armistice for twenty years."

The Treaty of Versailles was not ratified by the U.S. Senate which kept the country out of the League of Nations.

At the Washington Conference of 1921 the British and American Governments proceeded to sink their battleships and break up their military establishments with gusto. It was argued that it would be immoral to disarm the vanquished unless the victors also stripped themselves of their weapons.

At the close of World War I a humbled Germany was compelled to change its form of government. Kaiser Wilhelm was forced to abdicate, the German Empire disappeared into history and Germans were given their first democracy. The Weimar Republic was run by social democratic elite and derived much of its support from their labor union allies. Skyrocketing inflation and unemployment sent voters toward the communists on the left and Nazis on the right. After the aged Von Hindenberg was elected president in 1933, he appointed Hitler chancellor. Hitler suspended the constitution the same year. During the Weimar Republic sport clubs with a military bent and glider clubs proliferated. German submarines were built in Finland, Holland and Spain.

Fascism is a political ideology that the state is exalted above all else. There is only freedom to serve the state. Nazi Fascism believed that race is the fundamental trait and therefore the defining characteristic of people.

Axis refers to the 1936 alliance between Germany and Italy and the quasi alliance these countries signed with Japan as the Tripartite Pact, defined as an agreement binding the three powers to assist one another in case of an attack by a power not yet engaged in the European or Asiatic War.

The first alliance was often called the Rome-Berlin Axis to suggest all Europe rotated about a line between the two capitals. Finland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia joined the second alliance and became Axis satellites.

In 1939 Italy and Germany signed a treaty providing that Italy would fight on Germany's side in case of war and on June 10, 1940, less than two weeks before France fell to Germany, Italy entered the war.

Italy had conquered Albania in 1939 and on October 8, 1940 invaded Greece. An exultant Mussolini wired Hitler with "Führer we are on the March." Hitler was enraged! On the third day the advance was halted and on November 4<sup>th</sup> Greek forces counter attacked.

After a three week campaign German, Hungarian, Bulgarian and Italian forces conquered Greece by April 28 but Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union was delayed.

Finland had been a Russian territory between 1809 and 1917. Stalin obtained a non-aggressive pact with Germany in August 1939 which partitioned Poland and gave Germany a 180 mile common border with the Soviet Union. Stalin acquired military bases in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. In 1939 he attempted to establish a communistic government in Finland but it failed.

After refusing Soviet demands for naval basing rights and cession of territory in the Karelin Isthmus the Russians attacked with four armies on November 30. Despite reverses and Russian army losses eight times those of the Fins they sued for peace on March 6 of the following year. Finland gave up several military bases and the Port of Petsamo.

With the rise of Nazi Germany, Hungary signed military agreements with Germany and Italy. When Hitler seized Czechoslovakia in 1938 he gave Hungary the Carpatho-Ukraine and parts of southern Slovakia. In 1940 Hitler took half of Transylvania from Romania and gave it to Hungary.

Croatia became part of Yugoslavia after World War I. Political and religious differences led to friction between the Serbs and Croats and Croatia became autonomous as an axis satellite during World War II.

Romania, stripped of the Eastern province of Bessarabia, opted to join the German-Italian axis. Germany occupied Romania in 1940 and she joined in attacking Russia in 1941.

Bulgaria in 1940 became a base for German operations in the Balkan Peninsula. As a reward Germany allowed Bulgaria to take over most of Macedonia and Thrace from Greece and Yugoslavia. In March of 1941 German army units entered Bulgaria and King Boris signed his country's allegiance to the Axis.

By April 1941 the German military had eliminated 6 Norwegian, 18 Dutch, 22 Bulgarian, 28 Yugoslavian, 60 Polish and 138 French divisions and driven 12 British divisions from the Continent.

In contrast to German advances Stalin had destroyed his military command in the Great Terror. Half of the 75,000 serving officers were executed or sent to gulags. Although the remaining officers were thoroughly cowed and compliant to Stalin's will, the Soviet army had little combat capability. Stalin wrongly assumed he would not have to prepare for war until 1942.

In May 1941 Rudolph Hess, Hitler's deputy, flew to England. Mystery surrounds his mission, but shortly thereafter, Britain repeated earlier warnings to the Soviet Union that Germany would invade Russia. The warning was ignored. After receiving a memo from a Soviet source at the German airforce headquarters that war could start at anytime, Stalin wrote in the margin, "Maybe we should tell the source to go screw himself. He's no source but a liar."

On March 5, 1941 a Comintern member assigned to the German embassy in Tokyo sent Moscow a microfilm of a telegram from Ribbentrop to the German Ambassador giving the likely date of the German attack on Russia as mid June with 9 armies and 150 divisions.

Other warnings proceeded~

May 19~Dora from Zurich

May 20~Extern from Helsinki

May 28~ABC from Bucharest

June 15~Ramzai (Sorge) from Tokyo

Stalin, concerned about a two front war with Germany and Japan ignored all these warnings and went so far as accusing Sorge of being "a little shit who has set himself with some small factories and brothels in Japan."

Four hours before the German attack Stalin sent a message stating, "The task of our troops is to resist any provocation which could lead to major complications."

The overall efficiency of Stalin's regime has been grossly overrated. No institution in the country functioned efficiently on the eve of the war. The army had no reserve command posts, the Kermlin had no underground bunker, the railroads couldn't keep track of the military echelons, the defense industry didn't know how to make time bombs. Even Stalin's police failed to intercept German commandos who managed to paralyze the Red Army by interrupting almost all cable communications in the western part of the country on the night of June 21. With the annexation of Poland the Soviet Union had dismantled the fortifications along its original border.

On June 22, 1941 more than 150 German and Axis divisions swept across the Russian border with a force of three million troops. Shortly after this invasion Stalin was prepared to cede the Baltics and the Ukraine and also the stolen areas of Finland and Romania. If that was not enough he wanted to know what would satisfy the Fuhrer. He also requested Beria to ask the Germans why they had attacked.

When the German troops first entered Russia they were in many places hailed as liberators by the people long ground down and terrorized by Stalin's tyranny. There were, in the beginning, wholesale desertions among Russian soldiers. But the savagery of the Nazi occupation and the obvious aims of the German conquerors to plunder the Russian lands, enslave the people and colonize the East with Germans soon destroyed any collapse of the Bolshevik regime.

On June 28 Stalin sanctioned a directive concerning "traitors who had fled abroad," a euphemism for the hundreds of thousands of soldiers captured by the Germans. Not only were they all to be purged once they were repatriated; their families were to be punished for their disloyalty as well.

The Soviet countered early enemy gains by burning or destroying factories, dams, food supplies and everything else they could not move. Bands of Russians fought behind the German lines. Factories and machinery were moved to safety east of the Urals. Great Britain and the U.S. shipped land-base supplies thru the Arctic Ocean and the Persian Gulf.

As early as October 1941 Richard Sorge assured Moscow that Japan was committed to war against the U.S. and therefore would use its Manchurian army to attack Siberia only if the Germans reached Sverdlovsk. Sverdlovsk was located on the eastern slope of the Ural Mountains, about 1,200 miles northeast of Moscow. Czar Nicholas and his family were murdered there on July 16, 1918 when the city was then called Ekaterinburg.

Between October and November Stalin transferred 8-10 rifle divisions with 1,000 tanks and 1,000 aircraft from the Far East to the Moscow area. In the early morning hours of December 5, the Soviet counter offensive began transforming the Battle of Moscow from defensive to offensive. Thanks to Richard Sorge Moscow would never again be seriously threatened by the German army.

Three days after the message to Moscow, Japan authorities arrested Sorge and 35 members of his spy ring, two of them Japanese. He was executed two years later.

The turning point of the war occurred in February 1943. The battle of Stalingrad ended when 91,000 German soldiers, including 24 generals surrendered. Two months before this army numbered 285,000. Of these captured only 5,000 were destined to see the Fatherland again.

Churchill wrote in *Closing the Ring* in June 1944. "The Russian armies had driven the German invaders from their country. All the gains Hitler had acquired so swiftly from the Soviets three

years before had vanished with staggering losses of men and equipment. The Polish frontiers had been reached. Romania and Bulgaria were desperately seeking to escape the vengeance of their Eastern conquerors.

The loss of the Rumanian and Hungarian oil fields and the bombing of the synthetic oil plants in Germany caused such an acute shortage of gasoline that a good part of the desperately needed fighter planes had to be grounded and were destroyed by Allied air attacks. Many panzer divisions could not move for lack of fuel for their tanks.

The Germans had produced a thousand new jet fighters. The conventional Allied fighter was no match for the German fighter in the air, but few ever got off the ground.

In January 1945 the Russians overran all of Poland and Lithuania, entering Silesca and soon were a mere 30 miles from Berlin. During that month the German military lost more personnel than the combined total of American and British dead during the entire European campaign.

The Russians entered Vienna on April 13, 1945 and shortly afterward surrounded Berlin with the Fuhrer within it. On the Elbe River April 25<sup>th</sup> the Russian 58<sup>th</sup> guards met the 69<sup>th</sup> U.S. division and the Reich was cut in half.

As Russian forces at last entered Berlin itself, Hitler committed suicide April 30<sup>th</sup> and eight days later all German resistance ceased. The fate of conquered Europe was subsequently settled at the YALTA Conference and Potsdam Conference.

Most German POWs under Soviet control would perish in camps under harsh conditions. A few survivors would be released more than ten years after the end of the war. Russian POWs returning to the Soviet Union were considered traitors and were sent to the Gulags or killed outright.

The last Big Three meeting in February 1945 found Roosevelt quite ill and he was further disadvantaged by having his closest advisor, Harry Hopkins, a Soviet agent. In the State Department, Alger Hiss was passing critical information to Stalin on a number of subjects, including American progress on the Atomic bomb.

Roosevelt feared that if the Soviet Union wasn't included in the Pacific war, Stalin could wreak havoc in Europe while the U.S. and Great Britain focused on Asia. He had to promise that the Soviet Union would gain control of ports, bases and rail lines in Manchuria as well as the lower one-half of Sakhalin Island which had been lost in the treaty that ended the Russo-Japanese war in 1905.

The first atomic bomb destroyed 4.7 square miles of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. Russia declared war on Japan and invaded Manchuria and occupied half of Sakhalin Island on August 8.

Russian military casualties included 6 million dead and 14 million wounded.

Germany lost 3.2 million dead, 7.25 million wounded and 1.3 million missing.

Between 1941 and 1945 the USSR received from the U.S. and Great Britain:

- 25,000 aircraft
- 12,000 tanks
- 3,000,000 tons of fuel
- 375,000 trucks
- 114,000 tons of rubber
- 15,000,000 pairs of boots

After the war the Soviet Union refused to recognize the support given to them.

On August 23, 1942 near the river Don, 600 Italian soldiers of the Savoy Cavalry charged on horseback against 2,000 Russians. Using sabres and hand grenades against mortars and machine guns they put the enemy to flight. It was the last successful cavalry charge of the war.

The whole of the Italian army was wiped out in December 1942 west of Stalingrad.

The Allies landed on the Italian Peninsula September 3, 1943 and Italy surrendered on the same day. On October 13 Italy declared war on Germany and encouraged the army to turn on the German occupiers. Instead, they allowed themselves to be disarmed.

Victor Emmanuel III gave up the Italian throne on May 9, 1946 and on June 2 Italians chose a republic to replace the monarchy which had been closely associated with fascism.

Allied troops left Italy after a peace treaty was signed in 1947. Italy lost possession in Eritrea, Ethiopia and Libya.

Since 1948 Christian Democrats have controlled Italian politics usually in coalition with smaller parties, against the socialists and communists.

Finland declared war on the Soviet Union on June 26, the same day as Italy and on June 28, 1941 attacked the Russians in Karelia. Despite German pressure, the Finnish government had decided not to advance in the Leningrad region beyond the pre-1939 frontier.

December 5, 1941 Britain declared war on Finland, Hungary and Romania.

In August 1944 Finland made peace with the Allies and on March 3, 1945 declared war on Germany, thus earning a place at the table of the victor powers.

Finland's defeat by the Russians in 1944 caused her to lose 17,640 square miles of land to the Soviet Union.

Russia claimed a three hundred million war debt against Finland which was paid off in 1952 by reparations estimated at \$900,000,000. Nearly 500,000 Finns left the land ceded to Russia rather than live there.

Hungary joined Germany in the invasion of Russia but was severely beaten and asked the allied forces for a separate armistice. Russian troops invaded and occupied all of Hungary by 1945. She signed an armistice with the allies and gave up all territory it had gained since 1938.

An all-communist government was formed in 1949, the change being facilitated by the presence of Russian troops. A Hungarian revolt in 1956 was crushed as Russian troops poured into the country. Many citizens were killed or sent to prisons in Russia. About 200,000 Hungarians fled the country, including our own Anton Zoli.

Romania made an armistice with the Allies in 1944 and entered the war on their side. In October 1944 in an unaccustomed alliance with Bulgaria and Russia attacked German troops in Hungary.

An Allied Control Council with a Russian representative as chairman was established to run the country. In 1947 the communists proclaimed Romania a Peoples Republic.

Bulgaria declared war on the United States and Great Britain in 1941. On September 5, 1944 the Soviet Union declared war on Bulgaria and defeated the country by September 10. Bulgaria had never been to war with Russia.

A Bulgarian Communist government known as the Fatherland Front was proclaimed. A constitution like that of the Soviet Union was adopted in 1947. Bulgaria joined the Warsaw pact in 1955 and became a member of the United Nations the same year.

Germany was divided into four military zones. The territories Hitler had seized were taken away. Austria was declared independent. Russia moved entire factories from Germany to Russia. In 1947 the U.S. and British zones were united. In contrast, Russia rigidly controlled its zone as a Communist police state.

A unique aftermath of the war, the Nuremberg trials were to become the object of much controversy. The charge of waging a war of aggression could also be applied to the Soviet Union for its attack on Finland. Anger over the Katyn Forest massacre of Polish prisoners of war

was, at Soviet insistence, excluded from the investigation. There were those who argued that Britain and France, by their acquiescence in Hitler's annexation of Austria and the Sudetenland in 1939, had been parties to the initial phases of aggression.

The fascination with Stalin's Hitler did not end in 1945 as evidenced by a New York Times opinion column by Anthony Bevor in the Sunday, October 11, 2009 edition. He stated that Stalin was obsessed with every detail about his archenemy, whom he both feared and admired in a distorted way.

Stalin went to great lengths to conceal the facts that Hitler's body had been positively identified by the Soviet counterintelligence agency using his lower jaw as confirmed by the assistant to Hitler's dentist.

Recently a barrage of disinformation from the Russians concerning World War II including attempts to blame the Poles and the British for its outbreak and rumors that Hitler was living in Bavaria after April 1945. Of course, Bavaria was part of the American zone of occupation.

I will now end with Churchill's famous words: "I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma."



