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The Battle of Stalingrad: The Bloodiest Battle in History

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ABSTRACT

The information in this paper will contain my view of the collateral damage that was inflicted to the Russian people during the Battle of Stalingrad. The paper will explain the definition or history of the term “collateral damage”. It will also provide a brief explanation of the Russian Army’s state of readiness prior to the battle. It will then discuss the advantages that Germany had over Russia prior to the attack. It will finally conclude with my conclusion about Joseph Stalin’s leadership.

History of Collateral Damage

Armies prior to the 20th Century destroyed countless lives, livestock, natural resources and property. Throughout the history of war collateral damage was never discussed “officially” by any agency until Desert Storm, then and only then was it mentioned by the United States Army and news reporters covering the war.

Protocol I of 1977, an amendment to the 1949 Geneva Conventions set a foundation for collateral damage states, “Parties to the conflict shall at all times distinguish between the civilian population and combatants and between civilian objects and military objectives and accordingly shall direct their operations only against military objectives.” The term collateral damage is not specifically mentioned throughout the Geneva Convention or Protocol I, but the concept is implied with this amendment to the 1949 Geneva Convention, Laws of War. The underpinning of the protocol is it is the combative commander responsibility to limit the unnecessary loss of life to civilian personnel and civilian objects in the time of war, period. Combative commander is implied as not only for the commander in the offensive posture, but in the defensive posture as well. If either commander is guilty of placing the civilian population in harms way, they are guilty of violating the 1977 Protocol I, amendment to the Geneva Convention of 1949, and will be tried as a war criminal. The terms “indiscriminant killing” and “proportional gains” are keywords in the Protocol I and are merely the footholds to actually defining the term “collateral damage”. Indiscriminant killing are the killings of civilian personnel when trying to destroy military objectives without concern for their welfare. Proportional gain is defined as “what amount” of destruction is “necessary” to human life or property on the battlefield to achieve the combatant commander’s objective (Fischer). If combative commanders are going to exceed the

proportional gain or have indiscriminant killing he or she will not engage in the combat activity or must change his plan to engage the enemy. Failure to do so may lead him or her to be tried as a war criminal for violating Protocol I.

Russia's and Germany's Relationship

Some would say that Germany attacked Russia without cause. On August 23, 1939, Russia and Germany signed a non-aggression pact called the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The non-aggressive pact was signed by both countries for the following reasons: 1) to split up Baltic States (Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), and Poland states, should it be captured by one of the two parties, 2) established a non-aggressive pact effective for ten-years, 3) mentioned that any discrepancy between the countries would be solved in by peaceful or "friendly" methods, and 4) establish a communication protocol between both parties to resolve all issues (Molotov-Ribbentrop, 1939). This non-aggressive pact was signed because Russia and Germany wanted its land back that had been given to those countries after previous wars. The Germans wanted the land for its resources. Adolf Hitler knew that the few, scarce resources in each of these countries would assist Germany in its war efforts against the United Kingdom. In my opinion, Hitler's motivation to take these states where to use them as stepping stones to get a foothold into Russia because Russia had plenty of natural resources that Hitler needed to continue his war. Lastly, prior to the attack, Germany and Russia had a good economical relationship they traded commodities that neither had. Germany needed oil from Russia and Russia needed technology from Germany, keeping the peace was at the best interest for both countries.

Joseph Stalin's Refusal to Accept his Staffs Advice

Stalin was ignorant to the dangers that threatened his country. He was given four advance notices of the impending German attack that he failed to act upon. His chief spy, Dr. Richard Sorge, gave the first notice to him. Dr. Sorge told Stalin that Hitler was making secretive agreements with the Axis powers to attack Russia. He also told Stalin when it was going to occur. Stalin ignored his warning and took no action to build-up the country's forces in its western boundaries. Swedish cryptanalysts gave him his second notice; once again, Stalin took no action to develop plans to improve the country's defensive posture. Another warning came from his intelligence services. They repeatedly told Stalin about the impending invasions, they even provided the date and time. His last notice came from his Air Force commanders. He received numerous reports about the increased number of German reconnaissance missions over the country still he did nothing. Stalin, ignoring the obvious, convinced himself that Hitler would attack the United Kingdom before attacking Russia. He insisted that his staff take no action because he informed them about the German activities to the north; he thought that Hitler was getting ready to invade the United Kingdom. He refused to believe that his country was at risk and continued to cite the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact to his staff. Instead of readying his defenses for an attack, his primary concern was whether he would provoke Hitler if he positioned more troops in the western region or placed them on alert. His concern for his alliance with Germany outweighed his concern for his alliance for his compatriots. Stalin's lack of action prior to the attack would lead to the bloodiest battle in history, Stalingrad.

Adolf Hitler Takes Advantage of his Relationship with Joseph Stalin

On the other hand, Hitler knew that Russia was in the midst of a crisis; rebuilding its army due to outdated or unmanned equipment, lack of officer corps, and a reorganization of the Armed Forces structure. Hitler knew that Stalin had dismantled his officer corps due to a lack of political integrity and officer's dissatisfaction with the way Stalin was changing the Armed Forces. Of 226 Soviet division commanders, there was not one graduate of the Frunze Academy (the Russian West Point) (Hoyt, 1993, pg. 20-21). Russian officers were either shot or sent to Siberia for their insubordination, thus reducing the battlefield experience of Russian officer's corps. Additionally, after the fall of France, Hitler knew that Stalin wanted to change the battlefield strategies. Stalin and Hitler knew that Russia's defenses were similar to France's defenses and when the Germany Army rolled through France's defenses in 1938 in a few weeks, Stalin insisted that a change was required. Additionally, Hitler knew that the reorganization of the Red Army was poorly implemented and gave him even more of an advantage in defeating Russia's Army. Hitler knew that the young and inexperienced officers did not have the talent, battlefield experience, or expertise to pull-off the transformation of the Red Army. He knew that the Russian Soldiers' discipline, morale, and motivation was low throughout the transformation period, placing Russia in the cross arrows of the Germans Wehrmacht (War Machine) weapon systems, one more reason to attack.

Another factor that supported Hitler's decision to attack was the reports that he received from his intelligence officers that the Red Army could not return fire, if fired upon by German Soldiers. Even more significant was the reports that the Red Army's Air Force was not allowed to shoot down German reconnaissance aircrafts (every flight over Russia identified key defensive

positions, ammunitions and fuel depots, and major factories in the country). Stalin gave these orders to maintain a “good and peaceful” relationship with Germany; he wanted his Soldiers to comply with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, even though Germany would not. Every action by Germany, up to June 22, 1941 was a well-executed plan that Hitler established and orchestrated to subdue the Red Army’s defensive posture and aggressiveness. With the Red Army’s defensive posture subdued and numerous other factors concerning the disarray of Russia’s Army, Hitler prepared for Operation Barbarossa. On June 22, 1941, Hitler ordered the German commanders to execute Operation Barbarossa, the attack into Russia.

Russia’s Lack of Preparedness Result in the Loss of Russian Lives

During the morning of the attack, few Soviet units knew about the attack and were either decimated or captured. The Luftwaffe conducted the initial attack on main supply routes, ammunition and supply depots and factories, killing thousands of Soldiers and civilians. Their reconnaissance missions that flew over Russia provided them with excellent intelligence prior the ground war beginning. The Russian Soldiers found themselves out-maneuvered, out-fought, and lacked leadership to recover from the onslaught of the Axis powers during the initial battle. Russian units were caught off-guard and during the attack, Soldiers began fleeing their positions and units. Not only did the Soldiers desert their units, units that had not been cut-off by the Axis invaders began retreating. When the word reached Moscow about Soldiers deserting and units retreating, Stalin was furious.

On July 28, 1942, Order Number 227 was signed. Order Number 227, “Not a single step backward” (Ni Shagu Nazad) prevented every Soldier and unit from retreating to safety (Showalter, 2003). Those caught retreating would be shot immediately by officers or would be

sent to the penal battalions as they were captured. Soldiers serving in the penal battalions were sent to the most turbulent fighting regions, the average lifespan for Soldiers in these regions was estimated to be about 24 hours. Additionally, commands told the Soldiers that their families would also endure undue hardships, usually death if they violated Order Number 227. The Soviet Soldier's and citizen's perceived the order as heartless at first, but after hearing about atrocities committed against the Jews in Poland, they soon realized that they had nowhere to go, fight, die or be captured and treated like a slaves, they chose to fight. During the war, over 400,000 Russians were sentenced to penal battalions and over 250, 000 were tried and shot for desertion (Showalter, 2003) . This figured was included in the 1.2 million Soldiers and civilians that lost their lives defending Stalingrad.

Conclusion

Collateral damage is a word that may have been drummed up by newscasters during Desert Storm and Shield, but its meaning has developed a sense of “life” during the last five years. When Germany invaded Russia, Germany pulled no punches to accomplish its objective. Germany's Luftwaffe and battle plans lead it to extinguishing the life of 75% that lived in the city of Stalingrad during the 199 days. Hitler's organized planning almost led his units to the brink of achieving its goal of controlling the huge amounts of natural resources in the western sector of Russia, but the cost of war far outweighed the means in which he attempted to accomplish his mission. He completely ignored the rights of the citizens and totally ignored the significant value of property throughout his invasion. Hitler's disregard of life and personal property surely violated Protocol I of 1977.

On the other hand Joseph Stalin failed to prepare his countrymen for war. His actions of ignoring his intelligence staff, reorganizing his Armies, and firing his staff were the primary causes of why the city of Stalingrad was a blood bath and reduced to rubble. His irresponsible actions lead to the most bloodiest battle, Stalingrad.

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