

THE PRINCIPAL CAUSES FOR GERMANY'S LOSING WORLD WAR II

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There were many different opinions as to what the principal causes for Germany's defeat were. According to my research, Hitler was the leading factor in Germany's loss. In case after case the facts seem to indicate that his decisions ultimately caused the major blunders.

Immediately following Dunkirk, which was a calculated gamble that if allowed to escape the English might make peace, the British army was in no state to defend England. It had left most of its weapons behind, and the stores at home were almost empty.¹ Now would have been the time for Hitler to press for victory. However, the Weracht had outrun Hitler's plans. He (believed that he) was not ready in June 1940 to invade England, because he had not supposed that a long war or an invasion would be necessary.

In 1939, he had started the war with less than fifty submarines ready, half of which were of only 250 tons each. To have won quickly against Britain, he would have needed several hundred, perhaps a thousand. To win the air war over Britain in 1940, he needed more first-rate, long-range fighter aircraft than he had; and to carry an invasion army across the Channel and over the beaches he needed special landing craft and amphibious with which no army in Europe was then equipped.²

Thus Hitler's disinclination to invade England was no surprise when it manifested itself at a conference with the Commander-in-Chief of the Navy, Admiral Raeder, on July 11th. His summarized views are expressed in the conference record: "The Führer also views invasion as a last resort, and also considers air superiority a pre-requisite."³ Nevertheless, according to one high ranking German officer: "From what we learnt later about Britain's situation it would seem that the war might have been won in July, 1940, if the German Intelligence service had been better..."⁴

The fact that Hitler had not planned on conquering England was further illustrated by his almost lack of interest in the invasion preparations.⁵ When the air war over the English Channel and the southern coastal areas of England, designed to draw out and destroy the British fighter air force, began in earnest July 10, 1940, he had little to do with directing it. The Germans were in superior numbers, and their best fighter aircraft had at first the advantages of greater speed and faster rate of climb. On the other hand, however, the British fighters were more maneuverable and better armed. They also had an advantage of fighting over or near their own territory, which meant that many of the British pilots though shot down and some of their disabled planes could be saved to fight again. To the Germans every man or plane shot down was lost, and

they lost twice as many as the British. On July 31 Hitler wrote to Admiral Raeder: "If after eight days of intensive air war, the Luftwaffe has not achieved considerable destruction of the enemy's air force, harbors and naval forces, the operation will have to be put off till May, 1941.⁶

As time went on and Air Marshall Goering's expectations were not fulfilled, Hitler increasingly tended to emphasize not only the difficulties, but the ill-effects of failure in an invasion attempt. The "wait and see" note became louder as the provisional date approached.

During the last week of August and the first week of September, while the issue hung in the balance, the British lost a fourth of their thousand trained fighter pilots and nearly 500 planes. Then in September Goering (under Hitler's orders) gave the southern airfields and their defending squadrons a respite by turning his attention principally to London to retaliate for an attack on Berlin.

The German navy would have preferred to see the British navy, naval bases and port facilities attacked. Thus Hitler objected strenuously to the "absolute air war", and expressed doubts about the whole operation.⁷ Increasingly it became clear that even the generals had no heart in the attempted invasion. They took the gloomiest view of what the British Navy might do. So, on September 19th, Hitler decided "to postpone" operation 'Sea Lion' indefinitely.⁸

Thus an important opportunity at decisively winning the war in the West were fumbled by Hitler. Next Hitler turned his attention to the East which was where the traditional German interest had always been.

Hitler's gamble in Russia failed because he was not bold enough. He wobbled for weeks at the critical phase, losing time he could never regain. After that he ruined himself, and Germany, because he could not bring himself to cut his losses by making tactical retreats when necessary.⁹

It was the story of Napoleon all over again - but with important differences. While Hitler missed the chance of capturing Moscow, he came nearer to decisive victory, conquered far more of Russia, and maintained his army there longer, only to reach an even more catastrophic end.¹⁰

One might ask why was the Soviet Union attacked by Hitler at this time in the first place? General Rundstedt, the most important general in the operation's early phase says: "Hitler insisted we strike before Russia became too strong, and that she was planning to launch an offensive herself that same summer, of 1941. For my part, I was very doubtful about this, and I found little sign of it when we crossed the frontier. Many of us who had feared such a

stroke had been reassured by the way the Russians had remained quiet during our battles in the West, in 1940, when we had our hands full."¹¹

Nevertheless, Hitler's professional advisors had concurred in the belief that the Russian ability to withstand an attack was poor at this point.¹² The fact that Hitler's 'judgement' had been proven correct before in the face of his generals, greatly helped in intoxicating him into doing more and more what he pleased.¹³

The most peculiar thing about this modern day Napoleonic attack was that it was not Russia's modern technology that stopped Hitler, but her backwardness. The German mechanized forces were held back by the poor condition of Russia's roads. If the Soviet regime had given her a road system comparable to that of western countries, she would probably have been overrun quickly. The Germans lost the chance of victory because they had based their mobility on wheels instead of tracks. On these mud-roads the wheeled transport were bogged down when the tankers could move on. Hitler had counted on destroying the bulk of the Red Army before reaching the Dnieper. When he missed his mark - by a hair's breath - he could not make up his mind what to do. When at last he decided to drive for Moscow, it was too late to win before the winter.¹⁴

Stalingrad is considered by most to be the turning point of the War on the Eastern Front. The supreme irony of the 1942 campaign was that Stalingrad could have been taken quite early if it had been considered of prime importance. When the 4th Panzer Army missed the chance of taking Stalingrad with a rush, through its temporary diversion south-eastward, the situation began to change. The Russians had time to rally and collect forces for the defense of Stalingrad.¹⁵

Meanwhile by the time the 4th Panzer Army had arrived it was too weak to make the bid against the new Soviet reserves due to the drawing off of divisions to guard the army's flanks.. Hitler became exasperated at these repeated checks. The name of the place - "The City of Stalin" - made the city seem like a challenge. He drew forces from his main line and everywhere else, in the effort to overcome it, overextended and exhausted his army in the effort.¹⁶

In summing up the situation General Blumentritt said: "There would have been no risk of panic in withdrawing this time, for the German troops were now properly equipped for winter fighting, and had got over the fear of the unknown that had frightened them the year before. But they were not strong enough to hold on where they were, and the Russian strength was growing week by week."¹⁷

The collapse of the flanks was foreshadowed long before it actually occurred. The leading indicator of this was the number of short and sharp attacks which explored the weaknesses of the German

defense along the Don. (These attacks demonstrated that only a slight German backbone existed in the Nazi-allied-occupied flank)¹⁸

Hitler, however, would not budge. His 'instinct' had proven right the year before, and he was sure that it would be justified again. So he insisted on a "no withdrawal" approach. The result was that when the Russians launched their winter counter-offensive his army at Stalingrad was cut off and forced to surrender. The scales of the war had turned against Germany.¹⁹

A question which was asked of many German generals was: "Do you think that Germany could have avoided defeat after Stalingrad?" General Rundstedt's reply was most significant because he never took an optimistic view throughout his experience in the high command: "I think so, if the commanders in the field had been allowed a free hand in withdrawing when and where they thought fit, instead of being compelled to hold on too long, as repeatedly happened everywhere."²⁰

In final retrospect Hitler made two other major miscalculations. In the spring of 1941, there were three unknowns in Hitler's planning: the extent to which American intervention was inevitable; the true intentions of Japan; and lastly, the Russian capacity for resistance. Afraid of being left in the lurch by the Japanese in the event of an early American intervention, Hitler urged Tokyo to act as quickly as possible and clearly hoped to smash the Russians within a few weeks. Hitler was in error in both cases. American intervention was probably less imminent than he supposed, while Japanese military plans were much more advanced than the Germans realized.²¹

These miscalculations were the ones which finally sealed Germany's fate. The fundamental question, with regard to America's role is: Did Hitler overrate the dangers of American intervention in 1941? Instead of pushing Japan into the war, as a result of such a miscalculation, and thus bringing the United States in as well, might he have kept the Americans out by preaching moderation to the Japanese? Who can say?

American isolationists were still powerful during the summer and the fall of 1941, as was evident in the congressional debates over repeal of the Selective Service Act and the Neutrality Act. On the eve of Pearl Harbor, the America First Committee was more powerful and more active than ever before. But are we to conclude that the United States government could not have overcome these internal obstacles to entering the war if the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor had never taken place? Many prominent historians, one being Wayne S. Cole, believe that the isolationists could have kept America out of the war, if Pearl Harbor had never occurred.²²

Some believe that Hitler's policy cannot be considered illogical, because he may have been perfectly right in regarding American intervention as inevitable and imminent, so that he needed to make

sure of Japanese support at all costs. Besides, Japanese policy might have taken the same course, even if the Germans had tried to exert a moderating influence on Tokyo, instead of encouraging the war factions.²³

While others believe that the "...underestimation of America was based on a classical Hitlerian blend of paranoia, megalomania, manic racial and social prejudices, and the sheer ignorance of a man without breeding or education who had never travelled." According to this viewpoint, only a man blinded by his own masturbatory rhetoric could ignore for the moment such considerations as America's huge availability of manpower and her pre-eminent industrial and technological know-how".²⁴

In summary, Germany's initial successes were due to Hitler's astuteness in spotting the value of new ideas, new weapons and new talent. He recognized the potentialities of mobile armoured forces sooner than the General Staff did, and the way he backed Guderian, Germany's leading exponent of this new instrument proved the most decisive factor in the opening victories.²⁵

By Hitler's success in demonstrating the fallacy of orthodoxy, he gained an advantage over the military hierarchy which he was quicker to exploit than to consolidate.²⁶ This led to Hitler's willful pursuit of a policy without strategy which blinded him to the futility of both his policies and improvised strategies.²⁷ When this happened the stage was all set for his major blunders.

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Footnotes

1. B.H. Hart, The German Generals Talk (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1948), pgs. 105-106.
2. Chester Verne Easum, Half Century of Conflict (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952), p. 577.
3. Hart, p. 145.
4. Hart, p. 151.
5. Hart, p. 106-107.
6. Easum, p. 579-580.
7. Easum, p. 531.
8. Hart, p. 153.
9. Ibid, p. 166.
10. Ibid, p. 166-167.
11. Ibid, p. 171.
12. Trumbull Higgins, The Third Reich in a Two-Front War 1937-43 (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1966), p. 277.

13. Hart, p. 132.
14. Ibid, p. 166-167.
15. Ibid, p. 204.
16. Ibid, 205.
17. Ibid, p. 208-209.
18. Ibid, p. 207.
19. Ibid, p. 209.
20. Hart, p. 210.
21. Saul Friedlander, Prelude to Downfall (New York: Knopf, 1967) p. 314.
22. Friedlander, p. 311-312.
23. Ibid, p. 312.
24. Fred Najdalany, The Fall of Fortress Europe (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1968), p. 9-10.
25. Hart, p. 299.
26. Ibid, p. 299-300.
27. Higgins, p. 279.