



THE BATTLE FOR MOSCOW 1941-42: HITLER'S FIRST DEFEAT

Dr Michael K. Jones

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It was with eager anticipation that the audience awaited Dr Jones's lecture on the basis of his earlier talks (Bosworth Feb 2006 & Leningrad Feb 2008) We were not to be disappointed.

The Campaign and Battles to capture Moscow were, Dr Jones considered, a turning point in WWII. By the summer/autumn 1941 the German army had achieved astonishing results in advancing 600 miles towards Moscow. Napoleon in 1812 had captured Moscow but had to retreat due to lack of supplies and, with the onset of winter, it is estimated that some 35,000 soldiers froze to death as they were not equipped for the extreme conditions. The lesson from history had not been learned by Hitler and the German Army was not prepared for fighting in a Russian winter. But the army did not fall apart, cohesion and discipline were maintained and the front held, unlike 1812.

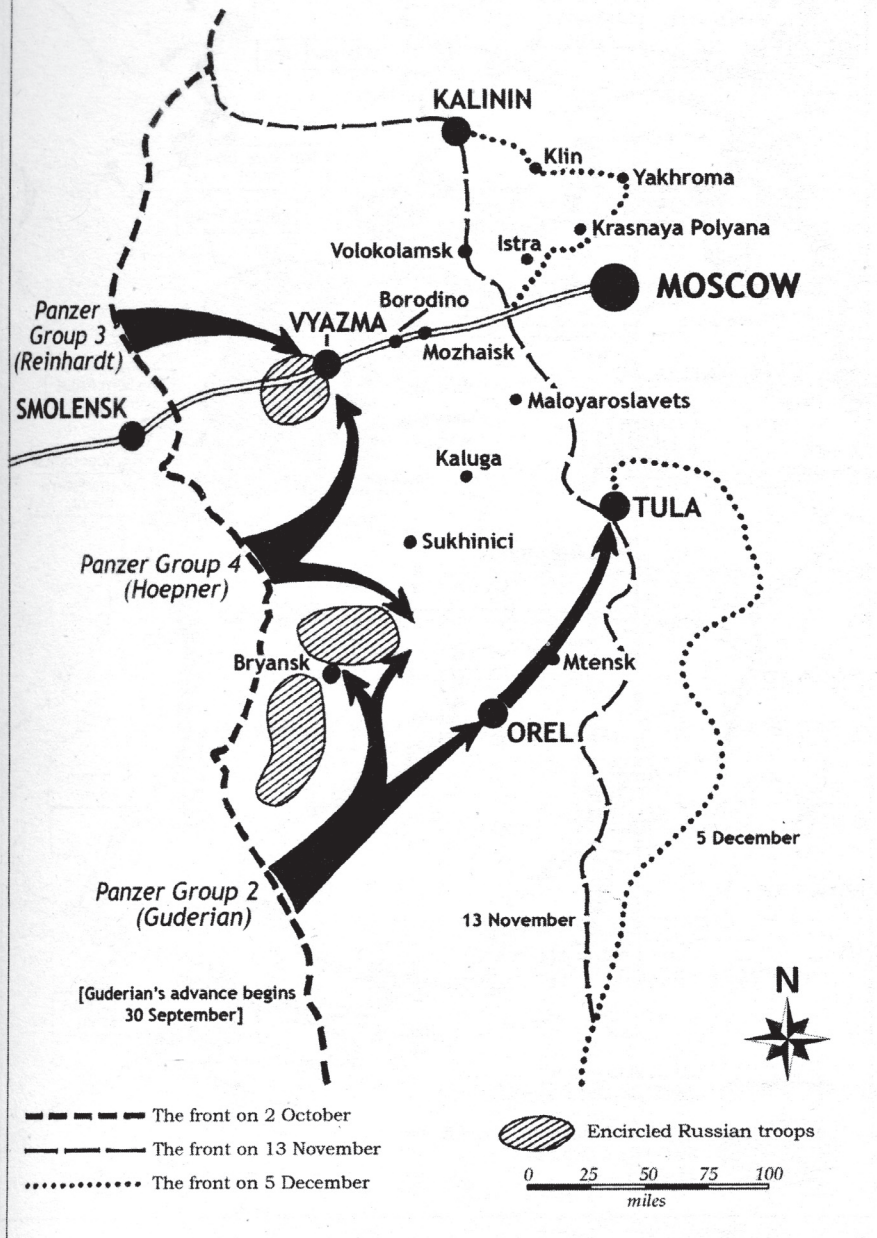
Politically, the Germans would have been welcomed by many people as allies against Stalin's rule: in the Ukraine which had suffered terribly in the 1930s famine and also by the populations of the Baltic States. German brutality put an end to this which cost them the opportunity of recruiting many extra divisions in their campaign against the Red Army.

In 1940-2, whilst Britain stood alone, Germany had received vital aid from Russia, a fact glossed over by Stalin when he pressed for a Second Front. In the summer of 1941, Operation Barbarossa was launched by Hitler as a crusade against Communism. Warned by the British, Stalin had refused to believe that Hitler would turn on him and so the attack and its success took him by surprise. On the first day the Soviet Air Force was neutralised with 2000 planes destroyed. The German Army was fighting a Blitzkrieg war as instigated by General Heinz Guderian. Hitler believed in this approach and had invested in the technical tactical resources it required, e.g. radio communication between all the fighting elements so that tanks, artillery, air force, infantry could all work together. This was not the case for the Soviet defenders. Air support is the key to Blitzkrieg and with no Soviet air force it got off to a good start. Overwhelmed, by September the Red Army had lost 1½-2 million soldiers killed or captured. Western military strategists believed that when the enemy had lost a certain percentage of their forces, they would also lose the will to fight and the country would collapse, but the Germans had miscalculated Russia's ability to sustain these heavy losses.

In the end, every German general blamed Hitler for losing the war but, in October 1941, the majority of Germans thought they had won. Nothing had gone wrong so far, giving them the self-belief that "we can pull everything off." In early October the last great push, Operation Typhoon (the assault on Moscow) began, with German victories at Bryansk and Vyazma with ¾ million Red Army soldiers killed or captured. By 14 October, Kalinin north of Moscow had fallen and the 1st Panzer Division advanced 60 miles against no defences; Moscow looked as if it would fall and on the 16th October evacuation commenced. The



THE GERMAN ADVANCE ON MOSCOW 2 October to 5 December 1941





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Soviet Government boarded a train to leave but Stalin got off the train and the Government stayed. He kept his nerve, courage and political instinct to continue resistance. He appointed Marshal Zhukov to command the defences of Moscow with 90,000 troops against 1½ million Germans. Then the weather broke and heavy rainfall turned the roads to quagmires, stalling the advance of German tanks and vehicles. Intelligence reports indicated to Stalin that Japan was planning to attack America and Britain in the Pacific and therefore would be unlikely to attack Russia. He therefore made the crucial decision to recall, via the Trans Siberian Railway, the crack Siberian divisions guarding the eastern frontier to secure the defence of Moscow; these would take three to four weeks to arrive. Meanwhile, vicious fighting continued to gain time for the reinforcements' arrival.

Initially Stalin had not realised that the war was not solely against Communism, but a race war against Jews and Slavs with the ultimate aim of extermination. Changing his approach, Stalin invoked a Great Patriotic War, opening churches, and in early December he held the traditional parade on Moscow's Red Square to celebrate the Bolshevik Revolution, despite the Germans being only 30 miles away. In his speech, Stalin appealed to Russians' love of their Motherland and illustrious past heroes. The basic patriotism of the Russian people and army saved Moscow. By early December 1941, the German advance was brought to a standstill and, with the onset of the severe winter freeze, their equipment malfunctioned due to unsuitable lubricants and overstretched logistics. Despite suffering terribly from the extreme cold, the German Army managed to hang on. This was their first defeat and Hitler could not cope with the effects of the weather and seemingly unlimited manpower of the Red Army. Hitler decided that the war could only be won by his willpower.

In his lecture Dr Jones raised a number of "what ifs". What if Stalin had boarded the evacuation train? Moscow would have fallen and, although a Soviet rump may have continued to fight behind the Urals, the would have effectively been over. In Britain Churchill may have fallen. Hitler may not have declared war on the USA, who would then have fought a separate Pacific War against the Japanese. Dr Jones speculated that Hitler only declared war on America in December 1941 because of the defeat at Moscow, thus making it a World War which Germany could not win.

This article is only a summary of Dr. Jones's lecture of the 1941 winter battle for Moscow. For those who want to go into greater detail I recommend his book, *The Retreat*, the basis of his presentation.

Malcolm Stocker