STALINGRAD, 1942

Stalin refused to give up the city in southern Russia that bore his name and the Germans were encircled in a crushing pincer movement. A German army became trapped inside the wrecked remains of the city, fighting a bitter house-to-house battle for survival. It was the beginning of the end for Hitler's war against the Soviet Union.

The German war machine had come to a halt outside Stalingrad and the Soviet Union had begun to gain the initiative in the most terrible war of the 20th century.

The contest for Stalingrad has often been called the most decisive battle of the Second World War. Before it, German armies had conquered most of Europe and they seemed poised to complete Hitler's long-desired conquest of the east. In the ruins of Stalingrad, however, the Red Army halted the German advance and so weakened the resolve of Hitler's army that from then onwards it was more or less in retreat back to Berlin.

One decisive aspect of the battle was that it revealed the limits of political power. It demonstrated to two of the biggest ideological dictators of the 20th century that war could not be fought by politicians alone and that military command was best left to generals. But only one of the dictators was to learn the lesson.

THE FAILURE OF DICTATORS

Up until this point in the great clash between the Nazi and Soviet regimes, each leader had believed that his own political will was enough to bring victory to his armies. Hitler and Stalin were convinced they knew better than their generals. In order to secure his grip on power, Stalin had fatally weakened the Red Army with purges of its officers and placed it directly under political influence. After war broke out, humiliating defeat on all fronts was the result of his paralysing efforts, and when faced with annihilation in 1942 Stalin was forced to concede...
command of the Stalingrad campaign to one of his generals, Georgy Zhukov, and let him get on with it.

Hitler, on the other hand, was intoxicated with victory. He believed his generals were too timid and constantly pushed them onwards, until he fatally overextended Germany’s military and logistical capacities. When two of his generals protested, they were relieved of their commands and Hitler took direct control of the fighting in southern Russia. The remaining generals were too afraid to counter Hitler’s commands and they and hundreds of thousands of soldiers were sacrificed to his vanity. After Stalingrad, Hitler no longer dined with his high command. He ate alone, with only assistants to perpetuate his delusions.

**HITLER TAKES COMMAND**

At the beginning of 1942, the Russians launched a winter counter-offensive, but the Germans were too strong to be affected by it and maintained their lines from Finland to the Crimea. In the spring, the German armies pressed forward, forcing the Russians on to the defensive once again. Hitler’s generals recommended that the German and Axis armies combine in one powerful thrust southwards along the Don and Donets valleys to capture Rostov and Stalingrad and then move into the Caucasus to assume control of its immense oil reserves. Hitler was impatient, however, and decided on simultaneous thrusts against Stalingrad and the Caucasus. This meant dividing his armies and the creation of a considerable gap between the two forces. Hitler’s generals complained that this would put severe pressure on their fighting and supply abilities. Hitler dismissed two of his generals and took direct command of Army Group A, communicating his orders from his headquarters in East Prussia 1,900km (1,200 miles) away.

In August 1942, Hitler concentrated his troops in order to capture the city of Stalingrad astride the River Volga. He issued commands to General Friedrich Paulus and his Sixth Army, which took on the brunt of the fighting. In the meantime, Army Group B held the line to the north of Stalingrad, while Army Group A led the line to the south, with a gap of 380km (240 miles) between them maintained by only one German motorized division and some less than reliable allies.

Georgy Konstantinovich Zhukov had survived Stalin’s purges in the 1930s to emerge as his leading general, having been awarded the honour of Hero of the Soviet Union for his victorious battle against the Japanese in Manchuria. Stalin now looked to him to defend Stalingrad and, for once, let his general deal with the situation without political interference. Zhukov made a very accurate analysis of the situation, believing, as
STALINGRAD

Top: During the fight for the city, front lines swung back and forth as each side made gains one day only to lose them again the next.

Above left: Germany's strategic offensive in the Caucasus region of southern Russia meant that Hitler's troops were dangerously stretched.

Above right: Central Stalingrad, where the rubble of bombed-out buildings slowed the German advance towards the Volga.

Hitler's own generals had argued that the German forces around the city were greatly overextended. Zhukov also observed that the flanks of the German thrust into Stalingrad were protected by Italian, Romanian and Hungarian troops, men who were less well armed than the Germans and less committed to the cause. Zhukov's plan was to hold Stalingrad until he could muster sufficient forces to launch counter-attacks against the weaker German flanks.

STREET FIGHTING

The bitter fighting inside Stalingrad dragged on for months and into the winter of 1943. The Soviet Sixty-second Army was surrounded in the centre of the city but refused to give up. A second Soviet army, the Sixty-fourth, maintained a small bridgehead on the River Volga, over which supplies could be sent to the desperate defenders. Soviet artillery and aircraft based on the other side of the Volga kept up a relentless barrage against the attacking Germans.

The rubble created by the fighting stopped tanks from advancing swiftly and led to hand-to-hand fighting. Snipers took up positions in the many broken buildings. The daily pressure on both sides was tremendous, and hungry, cold, frightened and exhausted soldiers found themselves reduced to desperate animals, depending on a primeval desire to survive.

General Vasily Chuikov, the tough son of a peasant, took on the terrible task of battling with Paulus's men in the ruins of the city. Paulus was less resilient and his health began to deteriorate during the months of fighting. The morale of his troops had slumped considerably too. 'Stalingrad is hell on earth,' wrote one German officer in September. 'We attack every day. If we capture twenty yards in the morning, the Russians throw us back again in the evening.'

Despite being more poorly armed, the Soviet soldiers fought for every square metre of the city. Building by building they were forced back towards the Volga, but it was a costly and slow victory for the Germans. And as the Germans slogged it out inside the city, Zhukov was gathering his forces for a counter-attack outside.

ZHUKOV STRIKES

On 19 November, Zhukov sprang his attack. More than a million men, with almost a thousand tanks, struck north and south of Stalingrad, taking the Germans completely by surprise. Zhukov had judged the opposition just right; the flanking Romanian armies and German reserves crumbled before the determined offensive, with many quickly surrendering. Soviet tanks executed swift advances, just as the Germans had shown them in earlier battles, and rapidly surrounded the German Sixth Army inside Stalingrad. By 22 November, Soviet forces had linked up. Realizing the danger of encirclement, Paulus wanted to pull his men out of Stalingrad and break through to safety, but Hitler was obsessed with beating Stalin and refused Paulus permission to retreat. The Sixth Army was trapped.

News of this development coincided with the Allied victory in North Africa over Rommel at El Alamein. For a moment, Hitler
was struck by uncertainty. The Luftwaffe promised to relieve the trapped soldiers by delivering 500,000kg (500 tons) of supplies a day, but in reality it could barely manage 100,000kg (100 tons). Soviet aircraft enforced a blockade of the city. Panzer divisions attempted to break through, but were met by stiff resistance from Soviet tank crews. Elsewhere, the Italian and Hungarian armies collapsed under further Soviet aggression. The Red Army had finally learned to coordinate its elements and concentrate its power against the weakest aspects of the enemy. Having found its strength, the Red Army would now take the war to Germany.

Almost a quarter of a million German soldiers remained inside Stalingrad, but by late December they were in a poor state. They were short of food, medical supplies and ammunition. Worn down by constant Soviet bombardment, German soldiers began to lose the will to resist. On 10 January, Zhukov gathered his forces to crush the remaining opposition. The fierce resistance they met surprised the advancing Red Army because the number of Germans left inside the city had been wildly underestimated. The Germans now fought with the same sort of desperation that had been characteristic of the Soviets. Eventually, though, German nerves gave way and on 31 January Paulus surrendered his army to Zhukov. The day before, Hitler had promoted Paulus to the rank of field marshal; now, on 1 February, Hitler condemned him for his betrayal.

Stalingrad was a costly defeat. At least 147,000 German soldiers were dead and 91,000 taken prisoner, many never to return. Thousands of German tanks, aircraft and guns had been destroyed. Germany's allies had suffered a trauma they would not forget. Soviet morale was lifted immensely; the depression of their earlier defeats was forgotten and it had been demonstrated that they had learned the lessons of war. The Soviets now believed they could win this awesome struggle. Stalin took back control of the war, but he was more open to the advice of his generals. Even Hitler seems to have been cowed by his massive defeat and allowed his generals to plan counterattacks from 1943 onwards.