

INTRODUCTION

The battle of Moscow involved 2.5 million men on both sides of the eastern front, making it one of the largest and, without question, one of the most important battles of the Second World War. According to Andrew Roberts, Hitler's offensive towards the Soviet capital was nothing less than decisive: 'It is no exaggeration to state that the outcome of the Second World War hung in the balance during this massive attack'.¹ For both sides, the battle for Moscow was an epic of endurance and sacrifice, while its sheer magnitude concentrated the world's attention as never before.

There can be no debate that Nazi Germany's drive on Moscow was a human calamity with few precedents in history. The battle began at the start of October 1941 with Operation Typhoon and, with a two-week pause at the start of November, continued to the very gates of Moscow by early December 1941. As one German soldier wrote: 'Burning villages, the bodies of dead Russian soldiers, the carcasses of dead horses, burned-out tanks, and abandoned equipment were the signposts of our march.'² Magnifying this level of destruction across a front nearly 700 km wide, Army Group Centre, the German force charged with seizing the Soviet capital, left a torrent of devastation through central Russia.

The offensive towards Moscow was only the latest in an unbroken series of battles that Army Group Centre had fought since June 1941. The trail of destruction began with a two-week battle at Minsk, followed by a two-month battle at Smolensk, and then a month of fighting down into Ukraine for the battle of Kiev. Even before the battle of Moscow, the

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number of dead, wounded and missing in the Nazi–Soviet war counted in the millions. It was warfare on a colossal scale, which was not lost on the participants of the time. Kurt Vogeler wrote home in December 1941 shortly before his own death:

The world has seen many great, even grand wars. But there has probably never been a war in its history, which can measure up to the present in Eastern Europe. This is true both of its size, which stretches for many hundreds of kilometers of active front, the vast spaces that host battles with million-man armies of opposing nations, but also by the method and manner of the fighting itself.³

Truly comprehending warfare on this scale is especially difficult. Reviewing the wartime records of armies, corps and divisions, checking supply timetables and production graphs, reading the accounts of the leading generals all goes a long way towards capturing the overall picture of events, but it only paints, in the broadest of brush strokes, how the war was actually experienced by the men who fought it. Even first-hand accounts only tell us the stories of those who survived and had the opportunity to publish their experiences or otherwise commit them to a public record. There is no doubt there are some very valuable soldiers' memoirs (notwithstanding the problems post-war accounts present), as well as some outstanding publications of letters and diaries, but these are still relatively few in number given the millions of men that took part.

Visiting the battlefields on the approaches to Moscow one can hardly avoid the imposing number of Soviet memorials. These testify to the fact that however much we may have learned about this chapter of history there is far more that must be left unrecorded, which died with its participants. In that sense it is even more important not to lose sight of the human dimension of this battle, because it is apparent just how much has already been lost. Yet the old Soviet battlefields serve as much more than just sites for passive reflection about the past. These battlefields are very much active sites for historical inquiry, as well as dangerous work-sites for the discovery, identification and reburial of countless lost soldiers still listed as 'missing in action'.

In September 2012, I visited some of these battlefields together with government-approved 'searchers', Russian volunteers who work every summer looking for artefacts, clearing away ordinance and seeking to lay to rest as many remaining war dead as possible. At first glance, the

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vast tracts of undisturbed forest appear like any other in northern Europe; only the odd mangled and rusted vehicle, often obscured by undergrowth and trees, are traces of the events that once took place here. For the most part, the forest appears like any other; its historical importance is deceptively inconspicuous. Yet once the metal detectors were turned on a vast battlefield was revealed to lie just below the surface of the forest floor. Literally every few steps yield new discoveries. Most of these objects are harmless – parts of weapons, gas masks, helmets, bayonets or shell fragments – but not infrequently unexploded grenades and other ordinance are dug up, making it easy to see why searchers die every year in Russia. Indeed, the fact that Hitler's war in the east is still today claiming Russian victims is one reason why the Nazi–Soviet war remains so very much a part of the contemporary Russian national identity.

For my part, the piles of artefacts coming out of the ground were a stark reminder of the scale of this battle, but it was all still somewhat detached from its human dimension. Only the occasional personal effect from an unknown man gave any sense of the human tragedy that the site also represented. The searchers told me that very few bodies are recovered, on average their team discovers just one or two each summer and even then it is extremely unlikely that the soldier will ever be formally identified. Soviet soldiers in 1941 did not carry 'dog tags',⁴ but rather capsules in which their personal details were recorded on a small piece of rolled paper. Yet the seepage of moisture often ensured that the identity of the owner could never be determined even if the capsule was recovered. Another common problem was a wartime superstition among Soviet soldiers that stipulated a man would not be killed if he had not filled out the identification paper, meaning that countless capsules are recovered with blank papers or none at all.

After many hours in the forest we were preparing to leave with a load of artefacts destined for the local museum in Vaz'ma. We had already started the long walk back to our 4WDs when word came that a body had been found and was carefully being dug out of the ground, one bone at a time. We arrived to find the soldier's leg arranged on a dirty blanket next to his wartime grave. Over the next hour the rest of the skeleton, along with gas mask and personal effects were removed from the ground. His lower jaw still had its full set of teeth. The work proceeded in a heavy silence; a mixture of quiet disbelief and unspoken reverence at what we were all witnessing. Eventually, even his capsule

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Figure 1.1 The excavated equipment from Sergei's gravesite in a forest near Vaz'ma (September 2012)

was recovered, and that night in a controlled room (to protect whatever remained of its contents) the capsule was opened for the first time since 1941. There was a paper, it was still intact and the name legible. Without the family's permission I shall not record the full details here, other than to say the man's first name was Sergei. His younger sister was still alive, and within days was informed that her brother's body had been found seventy-one years after he went missing. A month later, Sergei was reburied with his family present and full military honours.⁵ His fate

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reminds us that behind the faceless enormity of the battle for Moscow there are countless family tragedies as well as innumerable untold stories.

Indeed, the battle of Moscow itself, while hardly an untold story, often lacks an appropriate strategic context. The picture commonly portrayed centres overwhelmingly on the proximity of German forces to Moscow, and the close-run race between German offensive strength and Soviet defensive power. The fact that German forces reached the outermost parts of the city is often accepted as evidence for just how close the city came to capture. Indeed, many in the postwar generation remained firmly convinced that if only Army Group Centre could have pressed on a few more kilometres and seized Moscow, Germany's 1941 campaign in the east would have been capped by a resounding success. At the same time, failure at Moscow granted the Red Army its first real victory of the war, allowing a glimmer of hope for the Soviet people and shattering the German army's myth of invincibility. In these accounts the battle for Moscow assumes tremendous importance as an all or nothing, knife-edge encounter worthy of all the drama and suspense histories have hitherto attributed to it. Edgar Snow, a well-known American author and journalist of the period, helped to establish the myth of a close-run battle when he wrote that Moscow's defenders 'went to certain death, but the few hours they held the panzers back enabled the Siberian troops to reach the city and win the critical battle'.⁶ Such a thrilling account flowed seamlessly into the postwar narratives as one of Nazi Germany's great 'lost opportunities' of the Second World War.⁷

More contemporary accounts have not always disagreed. In his first-rate history of Hitler's and Stalin's dictatorships, the eminent Second World War scholar Richard Overy presents the Soviet line at Moscow as being 'held by the finest of margins'.⁸ Indeed, it is only with the launch of the Soviet winter offensive on 5 December that Overy sees the character of the war changing and a shift away from Blitzkrieg 'finally creating the conditions for a long war of attrition and averting a rapid German victory'.⁹ I have previously argued that this shift occurred much earlier in the Nazi-Soviet war and that a campaign running into the autumn of 1941 had long since precluded a rapid German victory, yet it is how we understand the battle of Moscow that most concerns this study. Part of the problem is that Overy's characterisation of events, as with other contemporary accounts, is not incorrect – there was indeed a bitter struggle, desperately fought on the roads leading to Moscow. Yet that is only one aspect of the battle.

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The strategic context in which the battle of Moscow was fought casts the events at the front in a different light, and shows the Soviet Union far from defeat in November and December 1941. Indeed, Moscow's fall was never seriously in question. It was Army Group Centre that was tempting fate by continuing with an offensive that had already ground itself to a halt at the end of October, and was now expending the last of its desperately short reserves of men and supplies just to reach the Soviet capital (to say nothing of conquering the city). The weather and conditions precluded a repeat of the rapid warfare that had typified Army Group Centre's earlier successes and, consequently, the November fighting took the form of frontal assaults with the panzer forces acting largely as battering rams. One German officer explained the transformation of operations in 1941: 'We gradually lost the ability to manoeuvre. War became one of linear movement. We did not bother about creating a "*Schwerpunkt*" [a concentration of forces]. We were no longer instructed to surprise, outflank and annihilate the enemy. We were told: "You will hold the front from such a point to such and such a point, you will advance to such a line".'¹⁰ The success of these German operations may have brought them to the very outskirts of the Soviet capital, but only at the cost of seriously depleting, and utterly exhausting, their forces. What is more, the German offensive never came close to encircling Moscow (as German plans stipulated), nor did they have the strength to launch even a single assault against the city (which Hitler had in any case prohibited).¹¹

Determining the course of the battle is as much about understanding German weakness as it is about appreciating Soviet strength. An essential element of the battle for Moscow was the careful build-up of Soviet reserves throughout the November fighting. No less than five Soviet reserve armies were withheld from the Moscow front as the Germans fought their way towards the city and Marshal Georgi Zhukov, commanding the Soviet Western Front, emphatically told Stalin in mid-November: 'We will, without fail, hold Moscow.'¹² Zhukov's confidence was not mere bravado. There was a conscious Soviet decision to absorb the German offensive, committing as few of their reserves to this task as possible before assuming a more offensive posture. Had the German offensive enjoyed greater success more Soviet reserves would simply have been released earlier. Zhukov's reports during the latter half of November informed Stalin that Army Group Centre was being 'bled white' and had no further reserves to call upon. The German attack maintained its slow

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grinding progress through sheer grit and strength of will. Soviet forces at the front were equally exhausted, but also equally determined. The difference was the *Stavka's* (Soviet High Command) careful husbanding of reserves for a counteroffensive, which Zhukov noted, 'had been prepared all through the defensive actions'.¹³ Thus, one must be careful not to equate German proximity to Moscow in November and December 1941 as some kind of harbinger of victory. Even without the presence of Soviet reserves, the likelihood that German forces could have forcibly seized the heavily fortified Soviet capital in costly urban combat must be considered remote. Thus, Zhukov's offensive on 5 December did not somehow snatch victory from the very jaws of defeat. The reality of the battle for Moscow is less sensational, but no less important. The strategic circumstances governing the course of the battle did not suddenly change from one day to the next, Army Group Centre was in grave difficulties even before the new Soviet offensive was launched and its progress was never favourable. Indeed, for a range of reasons that this study will explore (logistics, reserves, weather, mobility, equipment, communications and infrastructure) Army Group Centre's November plans were wildly optimistic.

While the fall of Moscow was never a realistic possibility in November 1941, accounting for this requires much more than just an understanding of material factors. As my past studies of German campaigns in 1941 have shown, the German *Ostheer* (Eastern Army) had been seriously eroded in strength, but its men were also suffering from the mental fatigue of constant campaigning. Doubts about ending the war in the east were openly being discussed in the autumn months, and fears for the coming winter only added to the trepidation. Yet the same concerns also convinced many soldiers of the absolute necessity of the task at hand. A final assault on Moscow could, many hoped, decide the war in Germany's favour, as well as provide winter quarters for the men and perhaps even allow some to return home for Christmas. The hope this engendered and the resolution with which it fired German resolve should not be underestimated. For those same reasons the implications of Army Group Centre's ultimate failure at Moscow were all the more destructive.

For all the fortitude that the men of Army Group Centre could muster in November 1941 this was paralleled or even surpassed by Soviet determination. The brutal German occupation practices as well as the Wehrmacht's murderous treatment of Red Army captives were well publicised by the Soviet information bureau, uniting soldiers and

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civilians, often to the bitter end, in their cause to defend Moscow. Cyrus Sulzberger, an American journalist based in Moscow at the start of the German offensive, recalled of the Soviet population:

Moscow didn't present the aspect of a sorely threatened city whose outer limits were not too far from the raging battlefield. Its population gave the impression of going about its work with unusual seriousness, called on to perform special tasks necessitating extraordinary effort and attention. The prevailing calm reflected something fundamental in Muscovite temperament, perhaps based on the old Russian proverb: 'The maggot gnaws the cabbage but it dies before it's done.' There seems increasing confidence that the old cabbage would surfeit yet another maggot.¹⁴

While postwar Soviet accounts of the November period cited the people's courage and enthusiasm as well as the superior strategic planning of the *Stavka*, early western accounts tended to dismiss such explanations as communist propaganda. Of course, there were exaggerations in the writing of these Soviet histories, which certainly enhanced their propaganda value, but much of it had at least a basis in truth. Cold War suspicions, however, allowed little room for objective assessment of these claims and instead there was a much less critical embrace of German generals' memoirs, which uniformly dismissed Soviet explanations. Instead, the German failure before Moscow took on an entirely new explanation, one which would expunge the German army of any blame. As with so many events, the German generals found it convenient to blame Hitler, citing his diversion of Army Group Centre into Ukraine in August/September 1941. Through this decision, they argued, vital time was lost for the all-important drive on Moscow, leading to what they also characterised as a narrow failure.¹⁵ The chief-of-staff of the Fourth Army, Major-General Günther Blumentritt, wrote after the war that the failure to take Moscow was a key turning point of the war in the east; 'our hopes of knocking Russia out of the war in 1941 had been dashed, at the very last minute. It was essential now that Germany's political leaders should realize that the days of the Blitzkrieg were over.'¹⁶ In fact, as this study will reflect, it was the military commanders themselves that needed convincing. What is more, there was ample evidence available at the time (and presented to Halder at the Orsha conference) that the wide-ranging offensives and crushing, one-sided

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battles were no longer to be expected. Yet the tendency of later histories to represent the battle of Moscow as a near-run contest gave an air of plausibility to the accounts of the generals, which also served to play down their own culpability for the failure of the operations around Moscow. Indeed, the most conspicuous absence from the generals' memoirs in this period is any personal responsibility for the critical decisions of November and early December 1941, in which the failure before Moscow saw the generals playing the leading role with only Hitler's tacit approval.

This study will revisit Army Group Centre's battle for Moscow in November and early December 1941, providing a fresh perspective on the landmark events that ended Hitler's five-and-half-month series of rolling offensives in the east. The aim will be to provide a detailed account of Army Group Centre's inner workings – its command structure, its decisions, its resources, its men and its strategic environment. This book may be seen as a continuation of my larger body of work on Germany in the east in 1941¹⁷ or a stand-alone study detailing Germany's fortunes in the pivotal weeks of the battle for Moscow. As with my past studies, the best method of assessing Germany's offensive strength is through its panzer divisions, corps, groups and armies. Archival evidence at all these levels has been consulted, but the study also makes significant use of first-person accounts in the form of soldier's letters, war diaries and memoirs. The book will proceed chronologically beginning from Chapter 2. The first chapter, as in my past studies, will seek to further contextualise Hitler's war in the east through the exploration of thematic topics that impacted on the development of the military campaign. In this study, Chapter 1 will examine Hitler's war of annihilation (*Vernichtungskrieg*), which ultimately proved even more deadly than the conventional fighting,¹⁸ and already by 1941 had seen the murder of hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians, both Jews and non-Jews. Assessing this vital aspect of the war is important both intrinsically and for the fact that it informed the manner in which the Wehrmacht conceived of its enemy in the east. It also formed the principal frame of reference for how the people of the Soviet Union were to understand the war that was being waged against them. Beyond the war of annihilation, I have also assessed the parallels and differences between Germany's eastern front in 1914 and 1941. This discussion further highlights German conceptions – and misconceptions – about warfare in the east in 1941, particularly the hubris associated with military planning. Yet a comparison of the two wars also reflects just how

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much they differed and thereby the unique undertaking that Hitler's commitment in Operation Barbarossa represented.

On 29 November, Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's propaganda minister, reflected back on the preceding months of Germany's offensive in the east and wrote in his diary: 'There are good days and bad . . . From such a heavy fight one does not emerge without scars. It does not matter who comes out of such a fight with a black eye or bloody nose, it matters who is still standing firm in the ring; and that without doubt will be us.'¹⁹ Clearly, even before Zhukov's famous winter counteroffensive the Red Army had dealt the Wehrmacht a few hard blows, which even Goebbels could not ignore. By comparison, Lieutenant-General Vassily Sokolovsky described to foreign journalists in Moscow that the Wehrmacht had sustained far more than a black eye or bloody nose. 'The Blitzkrieg, in its essentials, has been transformed into blitz-destruction of German men and materials. This began at [the battle of] Smolensk. The Blitzkrieg has developed into a continuous grinding of the German war machine. The process resembles [the battle of] Verdun, but in terms of ten or one hundred times the destruction'.²⁰ While Goebbels routinely understated the extent of the Wehrmacht's problems in the east, there can be no doubt that Soviet wartime propaganda also overstated them. This study will attempt to identify a middle road, charting the battle for Moscow from a strategic perspective, but hopefully without losing sight of the countless men like Sergei who died before it was over.