

Myths of the Stalingrad Battle

by Christer Bergström

Every great and decisive military campaign in history is shrouded in myth, legend and self-serving distortions of the facts, but only rarely have they had such a massive and decisive impact as concerning the German Summer Offensive in 1942 and the Battle of Stalingrad. This phenomenon is particularly evident in depictions in the Western world, for very special reasons. The number of myths and legends that surround this sequence in history simply reflects the scope of the German defeat.

This is the main reason why the author of this article wrote and published my latest two-volume book, *Stalingrad – New Perspectives on an Epic Battle*. In order to find the real story, it is necessary to go to the primary sources – on both sides!

In their book *The Myth of the Eastern Front*, historians Ronald Smelser and Edward J. Davies show how memoir writing by German generals in the 1950s shaped the general image in the Western World not only of the Eastern Front: “They conjured up a black-and-white world, in which Hitler incorporated evil and they, virtue.”¹ Two men played a leading role in this: Franz Halder and Erich von Manstein.

The so-called “diaries” by Generaloberst Franz Halder, the chief of staff of the Army High Command (OKH), were extensively re-written by Halder himself after the war, with a tendency towards exculpating himself in the Nuremberg trials, and also to shift all blame for the failures in World War II onto Hitler.

Von Manstein, who commanded Heeresgruppe (Army Group) Don during the final stage of the Battle of Stalingrad, is described by Smelser and Davies as “a commanding military presence raised to the cult level, a man much honored by postwar historiography, which he, second only to Franz Halder, influenced decisively.”² Smelser and Davies summarize the tendency in Halder’s 1949 book *Hitler als Feldherr*, where the author runs more freely than in his “diaries”: “All the strategic and operational mistakes of the war in the East were laid at Hitler’s door; Hitler’s amateurishness contrasted at every point with the professionalism of the soldiers. Hitler’s *wahnsinn* (lunacy) contrasted with the simple patriotism of the army. Hitler’s complete immorality contrasted with the traditional moral code of the officer.”³

Following in the footsteps of these two senior commanders, a flood of memoirs by German generals and servicemen have strengthened this myth and image of the war on the Eastern Front, and in particular of the Battle of Stalingrad. This in turn has contributed to influence general history writing on the Eastern Front in the Western World.

Soviet history writing also had a certain tendency to rectify some of the mistakes on the Soviet side, but not to the same degree as the German revisionists, for a quite natural reason: The Soviets won the war. Errors such as the lack of preparation when Hitler attacked on 22 June 1941, or Timoshenko’s Kharkov offensive in May 1942, are readily admitted. However, one exculpation by Soviet history writing has found its way into even Western history writing, and that is concerning Operation “Blue,” the German offensive to River Don in June-July 1942. According to the official Soviet history, the Red Army cleverly withdrew in front of the German forces in June-July 1942, and this avoided getting encircled. As we have seen in Volume 1, this is a completely incorrect description; local, tactical retreats forced upon the Soviets by the Germans have been described as pre-planned strategic regroupings.

Paul Carell – the pseudonym of Paul-Karl Schmidt – was one of the pioneers for writing the history of the war on the Eastern Front in Germany with his *Unternehmen Barbarossa: Der Marsch nach Russland*, published in 1963. This was translated into many languages and also became highly influential on subsequent history writing. Although he served as an SS-Obersturmbannführer and press chief in the Nazi German Foreign Ministry, with the “Jewish question” as one of his specialties, Schmidt/Carell joined the general “blame-Hitler-for everything”-line after the war.

Still, also making use of some Soviet official books, he devotes a whole chapter, *Neue Taktik der Russen* (“New Tactics by the Russians”). Here he wrote that in June and July 1942, Timoshenko decided to “to fall back east and south with the bulk of his armies.”⁴ This has served as an excuse for this piece of truly self-serving Soviet history writing. Twenty-four years after Carell, the two well-versed U.S. historians Earl F. Ziemke and Magna E. Bauer III repeated in their book *Moscow To Stalingrad: Decision In The East* the myth that in July 1942, “the Stavka, for the first time in the war, ordered a strategic retreat.”⁵ Ziemke and

Bauer did not merely copy what Carell wrote; they have researched the sources and explain: “The actual [retreat] order must be pieced together from a half-dozen sentences in three sources. [The Soviet] *History of the Second World War*, while it is specific as to time, merely says that the Stavka undertook to ‘extricate’ the Southwestern and Southern Fronts ‘from the enemy’s blows.’ *The History of the Great Patriotic War* states that Southwestern Front and the right flank of Southern Front were ordered to withdraw to the line of Novaya Kalitva (on the Don) – Popasnaya (on the Donets), a distance of roughly 60 miles (100 km), and dig in there. The Popular Scientific Sketch states, ‘...Supreme Headquarters ordered Southwest and South Fronts to retreat to the Don...’”

However, as shown in *Stalingrad – New Perspectives on an Epic Battle* (Vol. 1, pp. 104ff), these were no “strategic retreats”; they were hastily assigned orders, in an atmosphere of panic, to try and save armies that actually had been put in grave danger owing to the orders which *forbade* retreats. Had there been a strategic retreat—which would have called for simply by a pure arithmetic comparison of strength between both sides—Soviet Fortieth Army would not have been trapped with 40,000 men in early July 1942, the Red Army would not have lost half a million troops between rivers Donets and Don in just four weeks in June and July 1942, and the Southern Front would not be left with only 54,000 Soviet troops to defend the Caucasus against close to half a million men of Heeresgruppe A in late July 1942. Between 21 June and 31 July 1942, Heeresgruppe A captured 452,598 POWs.⁶ But in this case, Paul Carell is so caught by Soviet propaganda that he writes: “The [German] attack achieved nothing else than to shove the evasive Russians in front of their own units.”⁷

Indeed, the misleading conceptions about the German Summer Offensive in 1942 and the Battle of Stalingrad mainly stem from self-serving accounts. Slightly contradicting his statements about a skilfully retreating Red Army, Paul Carell writes about the situation when the Germans had reached Voronezh on the Don in early July 1942: “Instead of the motorized German units pushing south along the Don, as planned after the rapid fall of Voronezh, in order to confront Timoshenko’s divisions escaping from the huge area between Donets and Don from the east, and to intercept them on the Don, the valuable armoured and motorized divisions of the XXXXVIII. and elements of the XXIV Panzerkorps were kept at the cursed city.”⁸

This is a quite strange statement. The fact is that XXIV. Panzerkorps and XIII. Armeekorps were tied down in the Voronezh sector through a massive counterattack by Soviet Fifth Tank Army. It was not a matter of stubbornly clinging on to Voronezh; there was no such option for the Germans as Carell implies. Furthermore, XXXXVIII. Panzerkorps consisted of the motorized Infanterie-Division “Grossdeutschland” and 24. Panzer-Division. The former was already ordered on the night of 6/7 July to “begin the march south as soon as possible,” and covered 108 kilometres on its march south on 8 July alone.⁹ A more truthful statement by Carell would have been that Soviet Fifth Tank Army’s attack held up and prevented German 4. Panzerarmee from seizing Stalingrad via a surprise attack in July 1942.

The two orders issued by Hitler on 23 and 31 July 1942 on the conduct of operations in the East have also been subject to a massive myth-creation. The order on 23 July for the German units to continue across the Lower Don and into the Caucasus has been subject to particularly strong criticism in history writing. Von Manstein set the tone when he wrote in his memoirs: “The German offensive in 1942 was dispersed in two diverging directions—the Caucasus and Stalingrad”, which ostensibly led to “the German attack getting paralyzed.”¹⁰ This is repeated in very many accounts of the battle, like Alan Clark’s *Barbarossa: The Russo-German Conflict 1941-1945*, which calls the alleged “diversion” of Hoth’s 4. Panzerarmee “a classic and far-reaching blunder.”¹¹

Beevor’s description in *Stalingrad: The Fateful Siege* is more fanciful. Here we are told that it was Hitler’s “feverish mood [that] pushed him into the most disastrous change of plan, which in fact wasted more time and more precious fuel as formations were redirected . . . southward.” According to Beevor, Hitler was “so desperate to speed the attack into the Caucasus that he decided to run the two stages concurrently.”¹²

It is hard to see how the continued advance by Heeresgruppe A towards the south “wasted” more fuel than if it had first turned east, and only afterward had swung towards the southwest. However, the main mistake in the common critique of Hitler’s Directive No. 45 on 23 July is that it completely disregards the situation at the time as it was issued. A cornerstone in Clausewitz’s teaching is to seize the opportunity and strike the enemy at his weakest spot. Following the disastrous blows inflicted on Soviet Southern Front

in July 1942, the Soviets had no more than 54,000 troops to defend the Caucasus against nearly half a million men of Heeresgruppe A. For the Germans to stubbornly stick to the original plan from April 1942 (Directive No. 41) and order Heeresgruppe A to march 400 km to the east, from Rostov to Stalingrad, and only then turn towards the Caucasus, would in such a situation have been contrary to all military logic.

So strong is the tradition to criticize Hitler's Directive No. 45 that some authors, like Robert Forczyk, even state the opposite, that with this Hitler "switched the main priority from the Caucasus to Stalingrad."¹³

It is also often repeated that through Directive No. 45 on 23 July and the order on 31 July, Hitler at first directed (or re-directed) 4. Panzerarmee to the south, into the Caucasus, and then again re-directed it, allegedly from a position down south in the Caucasus, towards Stalingrad. This indeed reinforces the image of a terribly fuel-wasting operation. Carell states that Hitler "interrupted 4. Panzerarmee's advance along the Don towards Stalingrad, halted it in front of the great Don Bend and turned it abruptly straight south in a total alteration of phase III of the grand plan."¹⁴ Carell compares it with the turning of Guderian's Panzergruppe 2 hundreds of kilometers to the south from the road to Moscow in August 1941. This is a common, but nevertheless completely false description of the actual facts.

In line with the original plan, 23. Panzer-Division and 29. Infanterie-Division (mot.) of 4. Panzerarmee reached and crossed the Lower Don at Nikolayevskaya and Tsimlyanskaya on 20-21 July 1942. No order was ever assigned to 4. Panzerarmee to advance deep into the Caucasus; its task was to cross the Don and advance towards Stalingrad from the southwest. This is what it did, and there was no detour, and no waste of either fuel or time.

The next frequent myth about the Battle of Stalingrad was coined by von Manstein: "For the dictator [Hitler], the name of this city was associated with his military prestige."¹⁵ Even a critical book such as *Stalingrad: Mythos und Wirklichkeit einer Schlacht* ("Stalingrad, Myth and Reality of a Battle"), edited by Wolfram Wette and Gerd R. Ueberschär, has been taken in by this distorted image. In the introductory chapter, Ueberschär writes that "Hitler saw the conquest of the city, which had borne Stalin's name since 1925, as a matter of prestige." He continues: "The struggle for the Volga city became a symbol of the struggle between the two tyrants. There could be no voluntary retreat without one of the dictators losing face and suffering a tremendous loss of prestige."¹⁶

In reality, to paraphrase the title of Ueberschär's book, the battle would have been waged with the same fierceness over this city, whatever its name would have been. The name played no role whatsoever for the military decisions. With the main objective being the seizure of the Caucasian oil fields, the land bridge between rivers Don and Volga at Stalingrad simply had to be secured in order to prevent the Soviets from sending strong reinforcements to the Caucasus. Furthermore, by holding the western bank of the Volga, the oil supplies along the river were blocked.

From the German perspective, the city of Stalingrad could not be left in Soviet hands, because that would have meant that the Red Army could have launched a counterattack, based on its Volga crossings. It may be objected that the Soviets still had that possibility both at Beketovka south of Stalingrad and in the area north of the city, as we have seen. That is true, but 4. Panzerarmee had attempted to take Beketovka, and failed, and the Germans planned to seize the area north of the city, though a precondition for such an operation was the neutralization of Stalingrad.

Von Manstein devotes much of his memoirs to explain how 6. Armee's defeat at Stalingrad really was "unnecessary." He claims that his 11. Armee should have been in place in the Don Bend to prevent the collapse of Romanian and Italian forces, thus preventing the envelopment of Stalingrad.¹⁷ According to von Manstein, it was a mistake to transfer 11. Armee from the Crimea to Leningrad in August 1942. However, as we have seen, this was not only a political necessity – Finland was contemplating leaving the war, and only the capture of Leningrad seemed to persuade the country to continue fighting on Germany's side – but also became a military one: Once in place in this northern sector, the elements from 11. Armee were decisive to save 18. Armee from complete breakdown in the face of the Soviet Sinyavino Offensive. Moreover, when the situation had calmed down in Leningrad in November 1942, General Maximilian Fretter-Pico and the headquarters of his XXX. Armeekorps from the by-that-time-disbanded 11. Armee could be sent south to help save the situation after the Italian Eighth Army had collapsed.

Von Manstein also lambasts Hitler for not having ordered 6. Armee to pull back from being surrounded. He starts by writing that "the encirclement of 6. Armee could only have been prevented if it had

broken out during the very first few days of the enemy offensive, be it to the west across the Don or east of the river to the southwest."¹⁸

However, the Soviets attacked on 19 November 1942, and on 20 November, the headquarters of 6. Armee was optimistic that it would be possible to build up a defensive line to prevent further Soviet advances from Kletskaya on the northern arm of the Don Bend. Its War Diary noted that Romanian 5th and 6th Infantry divisions were holding their previous positions, and that elements of 6. Armee were being shifted westward to block the Soviet advance.¹⁹ At that stage, a full-blown retreat by the whole army from bitterly obtained positions in Stalingrad would have been out of the question for any commander. More so, since 6. Armee's War Diary also noted that a critical fuel situation had occurred since the breakthrough of Soviet forces south of Stalingrad had forced the unloading of a train carrying fuel to be cancelled.

On 21 November 1942 the Army's War Diary observed: "Very scarce fuel reserves. The lack of fuel makes it questionable whether the elements of 14. and 16. Panzer-Division will be able at all to transfer to the Don's west bank."²⁰ It is obvious that there was no possibility of withdrawing the whole 6. Armee, when not even such small forces could be moved west. The next day, just before the pincers closed behind the Army, the same war diary established that "owing to insufficient amounts of fuel, the tanks and the heavy equipment have become inoperable."²¹

Von Manstein continues along the same track as he writes that "the reason for the annihilation of 6. Armee is of course to be found in the fact that Hitler – no doubt largely for reasons of prestige – refused to give up Stalingrad voluntarily."²² This has shaped the general image of the Battle of Stalingrad, but as we have seen, the relief offensive towards the enveloped Cauldron in fact aimed precisely at bringing out 6. Armee – with Hitler's consent, as the primary sources clearly show! Although this even is admitted by von Manstein himself,²³ it did not prevent Friedrich Paulus from claiming that the purpose was to establish a supply corridor to 6. Armee, so that it could remain in Stalingrad.²⁴ Many post-war writers, such as Antony Beevor,²⁵ have been taken in by this erroneous claim.

In reality, 6. Armee was not "unnecessarily sacrificed," but it was militarily defeated by the Red Army in a battle which it had no possibility to avoid. The main mistake on the German side was to underestimate the Soviets.

Another very common myth is that the German air bridge to Stalingrad failed because it was organized only on 25 November 1942,²⁶ that the number of transport planes was insufficient, and that it was a combination of adverse weather and technical problems that caused so few aircraft to fly every day. However, all of this is a myth – the air bridge was well-organized and working since August, the number of transport planes was sufficient for the task, and it was the Soviet Air Force that defeated the transport fleet.

Not only the air bridges to Demyansk in early 1942 and Stalingrad in the autumn of 1942, but also the highly successful air bridge to the Kuban Bridgehead in northwestern Caucasus in early 1943 – much less famous in history, although this accomplishment is worthy of praise – proves beyond any doubt that the transport means available for the Stalingrad air bridge were more than sufficient for the task of bringing in the desired 300 or 500 tons per day to 6. Armee.

At Demyansk, an isolated German force was supplied with a daily average of 273 tons of airlifted supplies during the previous winter, although the airfields at hand were not as good as those in Stalingrad, and the number of transport planes available was only about half as large.

Before Stalingrad was surrounded, the air bridge in this sector had been working for three months, flying in a daily average of nearly 400 tons of supplies to 6. Armee and 4. Panzerarmee between mid-August and mid-November 1942.²⁷

In fact, the Luftwaffe's battered air transport units carried out an even more successful air supply operation immediately after the Battle of Stalingrad – the one to the Kuban Bridgehead in northwestern Caucasus, achieving a daily average of 565 tons. This was accomplished with a considerably smaller air transport fleet than what had been available at Stalingrad, with airfields "not entirely adequate to the requirements of an air-supply operation," and landing strips "covered with deep snow in the beginning and later on softened by the thaw," as the Air Transport Leader Oberst Fritz Morzik pointed out.²⁸

However, during the encirclement of Stalingrad, again according to Oberst Morzik, the daily average of supplies flown to Stalingrad between 25 November 1942 and 2 February 1943 was just 94.16 tons – one-third of what was achieved at Demyansk, one-fourth of that to 6. Armee before it was surrounded, and just one-sixth of that to Kuban.²⁹

All objective factors on the German side favoured the Stalingrad air supply operation—more aircraft, better airfields, and better navigation devices. When Stalingrad was surrounded, Luftflotte 4 had a total of 192 Ju 52s and 181 He 111s that were used to fly in supplies. Through January 1943, to these numbers were added 455 Ju 52s, 359 He 111s, 76 Ju 86s, 30 He 177s, 30 Fw 200s, and two Ju 290s from Germany or other war theatres.³⁰ Hence, no less than 1,325 transport planes were available for the air bridge to Stalingrad between 20 November 1942 and 31 January 1943. A report on Lessons from the Air Bridge to Stalingrad, composed by the staff of Luftwaffe bomber wing KG 55 after 3 February 1943, notes that “the navigation equipment, particularly in the Fortress of Stalingrad, worked very good until the very last day.”³¹ Milch’s report concluded that—at least until the final days—“the unloading and loading of the aircraft took place without any delays.” Moreover, during the whole air transport operation, the flights were only rarely hampered by a shortage in aircraft fuel.³²

Low clouds, fog, icing, and all kinds of technical problems had been just as much present during the Demyansk operation. The one factor which made the Stalingrad airbridge fail was the Soviet defense, mainly its fighter pilots and the way the blocking of the airspace over Stalingrad was organized by Marshal Aleksandr Novikov, the Soviet Army Air Force’s C-in-C. To a large extent, underestimated in history writing, the victory at Stalingrad belonged to these Soviet aviators. The Stalingrad supply operation from 24 November 1942 to 2 February 1943 cost a loss of 488 transport planes—274 destroyed or missing and 214 severely damaged. Not only were the Soviet fighter pilots responsible for approximately half of these losses; their presence also drove off many incoming transport planes, and above all demoralized the Luftwaffe pilots to a point where an average of just 4.5 flights per aircraft were made in over two months.³³

Most accounts on the Eastern Front in World War II underestimate the contribution given by the Air Force, and although Stalingrad is famous for its air bridge, the Battle of Stalingrad is no exception. We have seen many examples where the activities by Luftflotte 4 were absolutely decisive—not least in saving Heeresgruppe A from having its supply line through Rostov severed. The Soviet Air Force also played a significant role to the outcome of the ground battles, not just in blocking transport flights to Stalingrad. As an example of this, the composite air corps 2 SAK in 8 VA carried out 8,114 combat sorties between 19 November 1942 and 3 February 1943, claiming to have shot down 353 enemy aircraft, destroyed 1,923 motor vehicles with troops, 448 tanks, and 204 aircraft on the ground.³⁴ These figures appear to be exaggerated, but they still show the extensive activity of the VVS in support of the ground troops.

In discussing the reasons for “the catastrophe that befell Nazi Germany in the battle on the Volga,” Russian historian Aleksandr Samsonov points at Hitler’s “gross miscalculation in assessing the might of the Soviet Union and its Armed Forces.”³⁵ This is a bit too simplistic. In actual fact, after the Soviet victory in the Battle of Moscow in the winter of 1941/1942, Hitler’s Eastern strategy lay in ruins and his armed forces were too weak to defeat the Red Army head-on. The Nazi dictator knew that time was working against him—the USSR was already superseding Germany’s military production—so he had no other option than to strike against his enemy’s Achilles heel, the oil in the Caucasus. Hitler did not underestimate “the might of the Soviet Union and its Armed Forces”; it was precisely because he was aware of it that he chose to concentrate the bulk of his forces to the Don Bend and the Caucasus. Instead, 6. Armee’s fate was settled by other factors, of which the following may be regarded as the most important:

1. Insufficient reserves on the German side.
2. The strategic need for the Germans to block the Volga.
3. Zhukov’s strategy of using Stalingrad as a “magnet” for German troops while new forces were brought up for Operation “Uranus.”
4. The stiff-necked resistance by Soviet Sixty-second Army’s numerically inferior troops inside Stalingrad.
5. The likewise dogged defensive fight by the numerically inferior troops of Soviet Fifty-first Army, which prevented Hoth’s Operation “Winter Storm” from breaking through to the Cauldron.
6. The skill with which Operation “Uranus” was carried out.
7. The Soviet Air Force’s successful blockade of the Stalingrad air bridge.

Each of these factors was crucial, and had to be present, to bring about 6. Armee’s demise. However, although von Manstein’s statement that the main reason was Hitler’s alleged refusal to allow it to retreat was

not true, the death of almost all the men in Army must be laid at the Nazi dictator's feet. When the Supreme High Command of the Red Army offered 6. Armee to surrender on 8 and 9 January 1943, it was a dying army where thousands of men who had starved for weeks were succumbing to malnourishment, exhaustion, and cold every day. There were 212,000 men in 6. Armee on 9 January 1943.³⁶ Hitler's order to stand fast and not surrender, blindly obeyed by Paulus, condemned all these men to death. Only 91,000 were left on 3 February 1943. According to Friedrich Paulus, 16,800 were captured between 10 and 29 January 1943, which means that around 100,000 perished during the last three weeks of the battle, mainly due to undernourishment and disease. This mass-dying continued after the survivors had surrendered. Only 6,000 remained alive to return home after the war. Over 200,000 were sacrificed by Hitler. This dreadful figure has in turn been used in Cold War propaganda to draw a picture of the Soviets treating their POWs with the same brutality as the Germans did, or even worse.

Lamentably, much of the history writing in the Western world is tarnished with stereotypes about the Russian people. It must be kept in mind that every person in the Third Reich was subject to many years of massive racist brainwashing which depicted the Russians and Slavic people in general as "subhumans," akin to animals. This of course had a negative effect on the surviving veterans' memories after the war. Such attitudes are not uncommonly echoed in stereotypes about "the Russian" in popular history writing: He may be described as a child prone to brutality ("he could be kind as a child when he was on his own, but terribly brutal in a group"); it is often said that "the Russian" became "more lively" in Arctic temperatures, that "He" lacked the ability of independent thinking and action, and that once "the Commissar" was killed, he lay down his arms. The latter is a direct, although hopefully subconscious, reflection of the Nazi propaganda that the masses of Russian "subhumans" were under the control of evil Jewish Communists. Images such as these, or similar, form a great obstacle for a true understanding of the historical realities on the Eastern Front during World War II, and must be dismissed, for more than one reason.

The prisoners from 6. Armee were not subject to any mass executions or deliberate starvation, as was the policy with which the Germans treated their Soviet prisoners. To the contrary, the Soviet authorities did their best to shelter and feed them and provide them with medical care. There were several individual cases of brutal treatment of German POWs, but the general attitude appears to have been fairly correct. Otto Rühle, a German field surgeon in 6. Armee, used his medical expertise and his personal experience to describe the situation of the POWs in a letter to the widow of a deceased comrade after the war: "When we were captured in the last days of January, the vast majority was already extremely weak. Their bodies had lost much of their resilience. There were serious illnesses such as typhus, dysentery, etc. Tragically, a great many comrades died in the process, despite really self-sacrificing care of the medical aid workers on the part of the Russian authorities. I don't say this to satisfy anyone, but this is what it really was like: I experienced for myself how our opponents at the time stood up for us sick and weak people and I also owe my life to the care of a Russian doctor."

The POWs were simply in too bad a shape to be saved after such a long period of starvation in a typhus-riddled Cauldron, and the area was so devastated by many months of Luftwaffe bombings that sufficient amounts of food and medical equipment could not be brought forward in time. On top of that, the intelligence service at the Don Front vastly underestimated the number of surrounded enemy troops: They believed their number to be 86,000, while the actual figure was over 200,000, so the Soviets were not prepared for such a vast number of prisoners. They did whatever they could to keep them alive, but even though the POWs were better fed by the Soviet captors than by their own commanders during the previous two months, most of them were already in a process of dying when they were captured. The Soviets even opened the whole town of Beketovka to provide the masses of prisoners with accommodation, rather than to allow its evacuated population to return home, but it was too late.

"Ninety percent of all prisoners marched into the POW camps with a high fever," wrote Helmut Welz of 79. Infanterie-Division. "Despite the most dutiful care, many men could no longer be saved. The Russian doctors fought for each individual. Nurses sat by their beds, day and night. They sacrificed themselves, gave their last, their own lives, because many got infected and a few days later suffered the same fate as their patients."³⁷

The German Red Cross noted that 45,000 of the 60,000 prisoners in Beketovka died during the first weeks, with dystrophy causing 57 percent of the deaths, typhus 33 percent, and other medical causes, such as pneumonia or gangrene, 10 percent.

The total number of deaths in 6. Armee during the Battle of Stalingrad has been calculated by Heinz Schröter: Out of a ration strength of 334,000 men on 17 October 1942, he subtracts 34,000 lost during the Soviet breakthrough between 19 and 21 November and 39,000 that retreated westward and avoided getting surrounded. Adding Romanians who retreated into the Cauldron, he arrives at a figure of 284,000 men on 25 November. Then he subtracts 29,000 men who were flown out and the 123,000 who he claims were captured to arrive at 132,000 killed or missing during the envelopment battle.³⁸

However, Schröter's figures for the number of soldiers ending up in Soviet captivity seem to be too high, and his strength figures apparently also include so-called "Hilfswillige" (Hiwis) or Soviet volunteers fighting for the Germans. The ration strength (*Verpflegungsstärke*) in the Cauldron was reported by 6. Armee on 6 December 1942 as:

275,000 men,
thereof: 11,000 Romanians
20,300 Hilfswillige³⁹

(The number of Romanians is confirmed in Romanian archive documents.⁴⁰)

This means that there were 244,000 Germans on 6 December 1942. Since 4,410 wounded were flown out between 25 November and 5 December, and there were a number killed and/or missing in that period, one must assume that at least around 250,000 Germans and up to 15,000 Romanians were caught in the Cauldron on 23 November 1942. German historian Manfred Kehrigh presents slightly higher figures: Out of a total strength of 298,573 troops in 6. Armee on 19 November 1942, he estimates that between 20,000 and 25,000 were outside the area which would become enveloped four days later, which means that between 275,000 and 280,000 men of 6. Armee were surrounded on 23 November.⁴¹ These figures also seem to include Hiwis, but more than 11,000 Romanians who arrived between 20 and 23 November should be added.

If the 16,800 that were captured between 10 and 29 January are added to the 91,000 that surrendered between 30 January and 3 February, we arrive at around 108,000 ending up in Soviet captivity. Subtract these and those flown out from the total number of soldiers surrounded, and we arrive at a figure of between 130,000 and 140,000 German soldiers killed. And indeed, according to a Soviet "body count" – completed in November 1943 – 146,300 Axis soldiers were killed during the battle of encirclement. The total thus amounts to 160,000 killed or wounded through 3 February 1943.

But the Axis defeat was much larger than so. According to official figures, the Romanian Army suffered 158,854 casualties (killed, missing, and wounded) between 19 November 1942 and 7 January 1943. The Italian losses were similar. By the end of December 1942, only the Alpine Corps and the 156th Vincenza Division remained intact and functioning as combat units. After the winter battle, almost 60 percent of their Eastern Front Army was gone. The losses amounted to 3,010 officers and 81,820 men killed or missing.⁴² About 30,000 of these died, a large share of whom perished when they got lost in raging blizzards during the wild flight after Vatutin's Southwestern Front had crushed their lines in December 1942. The Soviets brought in 54,400 Italian soldiers as prisoners. Many were in a pitiful state. Only 10,085 returned home after the war. According to Italian reports, typhus and starvation-related diseases were the major causes of death among these POWs.⁴³ Another 1,290 officers and 28,400 men with severe frostbite were sent home in the winter of 1942-1943.⁴⁴ Second Hungarian Army lost 68,000 men killed or missing in action in a period of less than three weeks in January 1943.⁴⁵ In total, the Soviet offensive in the Don area in the winter of 1942/1943 cost the Axis a loss of almost half a million troops. Five whole Axis armies were completely annihilated. The Red Army's Voronezh, Southwestern, Don, and Southern fronts lost approximately 175,000 men killed or missing between November 1942 and early February 1943.

The greatest suffering during the battle, however, was that of the civilians in Stalingrad. In a dissertation on the subject at the Department of the History of Russia and Foreign Countries of the Russian Humanitarian Institute of St. Petersburg State University, historian Tatyana Pavlova criticizes the tendency in history writing to neglect the tragedy of the civilians in Stalingrad, which she describes as "in its size comparable to Hiroshima and the besieged Leningrad."⁴⁶ According to statistics presented by the Soviet delegation at the Nuremberg trials in 1945, the German occupiers were directly responsible for the death of

110,471 civilians in Stalingrad: 42,797 through bombing and shelling, 108 through hanging, 1,744 through shooting, 1,598 tortured or otherwise beaten to death, and 64,224 who perished as slave laborers in Germany or the occupied territories. Tatyana Pavlova reviewed these statistics and arrived at even higher figures, a total of 185,232 civilians killed through direct action by the German occupiers. But she remarks that these were only adults: “It is not known how many children died. They were not on the lists.”⁴⁷

As gruesome as these facts are, they contain only a part of all civilians who died as a result of the Battle of Stalingrad. Documents in the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History show that no more than 9,796 civilians were found alive among the ruins when the city was liberated. Masses of refugees escaped to the city in July and August 1942, causing the civilian population to rise from 400,000 to around 750,000. Among these, only about 150,000 were evacuated to the eastern side of the Volga, because the Soviet authorities initially forbade evacuation across the river. As a consequence of this policy and the German attack and occupation of most of the city, up to 200,000 of the remaining 600,000 perished at the hands of the Germans and less than 10,000 remained in the city in early February 1943. The horrific truth is that the fate of 400,000 people has never been sufficiently understood, although it may be assumed that perhaps most of these succumbed to starvation and disease among the ruins or on the Cauldron’s unforgiving steppe.⁴⁸ Tatyana Pavlova’s dissertation shows that “materials about the mass death of the civilian population were classified for many years. And the declassification took a very long time and was carried out slowly, with much of the material arriving only one year after my requests to the Federal Security Service of the Volgograd Region.”

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¹ Smelser & Davies, *The Myth of the Eastern Front*, p. 137.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Carell, *Unternehmen Barbarossa*, p. 434.

⁵ Ziemke Earl F. & Magna E. Bauer III. *Moscow To Stalingrad: Decision In The East*. Washington, D.C: Center of Military History United States Army, 1987. , p. 343.

⁶ Bundesarchiv/Militärarchiv RH 2/2621.

⁷ Carell, p. 434.

⁸ Ibid., p. 433.

⁹ Spaeter, Helmut. *The History of the Panzerkorps Grossdeutschland. Vol. 1*. Winnipeg: Fedorowicz, 1992. , pp. 357f.

¹⁰ Manstein, *Verlorene Siege*, p. 322.

¹¹ Clark, *Operation Barbarossa*, p. 210.

¹² Beevor, *Stalingrad*, pp. 77f.

¹³ Forczyk, Robert. *Tank Warfare on the Eastern Front 1941-1942: Schwerpunkt*. Pen and Sword, 2014. , p. 338.

¹⁴ Carell, p. 435.

¹⁵ Manstein, p. 333.

¹⁶ Wette, Wolfram & Gerd R. Ueberschär (ed.). *Stalingrad: Mythos und Wirklichkeit einer Schlacht*, p. 21.

¹⁷ Manstein, p. 323.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 333.

¹⁹ Freiherr von und zu Aufsess, Florian. *Die Anlagebänder zu den Kriegstagebüchern der 6 Armee. Band I: vom 14.09. 1942 bis 24.11. 1942*. Eigenverlag: Schwabach, 2006. , p. 317.

²⁰ Freiherr von und zu Aufsess, Florian. *Die Anlagebänder zu den Kriegstagebüchern der 6 Armee. Band I: vom 14.09. 1942 bis 24.11. 1942*. Eigenverlag: Schwabach, 2006. , p. 321.

²¹ Freiherr von und zu Aufsess, Florian. *Die Anlagebänder zu den Kriegstagebüchern der 6 Armee. Band I: vom 14.09. 1942 bis 24.11. 1942*. Eigenverlag: Schwabach, 2006. , p. 329.

²² Manstein, p. 322.

²³ Ibid., p. 351.

²⁴ Paulus, Friedrich. *Ich stehe hier auf Befehl*. Frankfurt a.M: Bernard & Graefe, 1960. p. 235.

²⁵ Beevor, p. 296.

²⁶ See e.g. Schröter, *Stalingrad*, p. 156.

²⁷ Plocher, *The German Air Force Versus Russia, 1942*, p. 233.

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- ²⁸ Morzik, *German Air Force Airlift Operations*, pp. 209 & 214.
- ²⁹ Morzik, Fritz. *Die deutschen Transportflieger im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, p. 160.
- ³⁰ Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv. RL 8/260. Erhard Milch. Erfahrungsbericht über Luftversorgung Stalingrads.
- ³¹ RL 10/106. Erfahrungsbericht über den Versorgungseinsatz für die der 6. Armee in Festung Stalingrad vom 29.11.42-3.2.43. Kampfgeschwader 55, Kommodore. Abt. Ia.
- ³² Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv. RL 8/260. Erhard Milch. Erfahrungsbericht über Luftversorgung Stalingrads.
- ³³ Bergström, *Black Cross Red Star*, Vol. 4, p. 169.
- ³⁴ TsAMO, f. 2 SAK, op. 236847, d. 1, l. 3.
- ³⁵ Samsonov, Aleksandr Mikhailovich. *Stalingradskaya bitva*. Moscow: Nauka, 1989. Chapter 10.
- ³⁶ Glantz, Vol. 3, p. 581.
- ³⁷ Welz, Helmut. *Verratene Grenadiere*. Berlin: Militärverlag, 1967. , p. 303.
- ³⁸ Schröter, p. 201.
- ³⁹ Bundesarchiv/Militärarchiv. RH 20-6/239. AOK 6, Ia. Festung Stalingrad: Tagesmeldungen und Funksprüche 21.11.42-10.1.43. Funkspruch 6.12.1941, Nr. 07048/42 [sic] geh.
- ⁴⁰ Serviciul Arhive National Istoric Centrale, București. Microfilm T-501, Rola nr 288, Cadre 239.
- ⁴¹ Kehrig, p. 671.
- ⁴² "The Italian Army in Russia: from Barbarossa to Stalingrad" by James I. Marino, *Warfare History Network*, December 5, 2016. warfarehistorynetwork.com/2016/12/05/the-italian-army-in-russia-from-barbarossa-to-stalingrad/
- ⁴³ Giusti, Maria Teresa. *I prigionieri italiani in Russia*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 2003.
- ⁴⁴ "The Italian Army in Russia: from Barbarossa to Stalingrad" by James I. Marino, *Warfare History Network*, December 5, 2016. warfarehistorynetwork.com/2016/12/05/the-italian-army-in-russia-from-barbarossa-to-stalingrad/
- ⁴⁵ Via Csaba B. Stenge.
- ⁴⁶ "Grazhdanskoye naseleniye Stalingradskoy oblasti v usloviyakh germanskoy okkupatsii: iyul' 1942 g. - fevral' 1943 g." by Tatyana Pavlova, dissertation at the Department of History of Russia and Foreign Countries of the Russian Humanitarian Institute of St. Petersburg State University (RSU SPbSU), 2007. <https://www.dissercat.com/content/grazhdanskoe-naselenie-stalingradskoi-oblasti-v-usloviyakh-germanskoi-okkupatsii-iyul-1942-g>
- ⁴⁷ "Grazhdanskoye naseleniye Stalingradskoy oblasti v usloviyakh germanskoy okkupatsii: iyul' 1942 g. - fevral' 1943 g." by Tatyana Pavlova, dissertation at the Department of History of Russia and Foreign Countries of the Russian Humanitarian Institute of St. Petersburg State University (RSU SPbSU), 2007. <https://www.dissercat.com/content/grazhdanskoe-naselenie-stalingradskoi-oblasti-v-usloviyakh-germanskoi-okkupatsii-iyul-1942-g>
- ⁴⁸ RGASPL, f. 17, op. 88, d. 226.