

Why was the war on the Eastern Front during the Second World War so barbaric?

Why was the war on the Eastern Front during the Second World War so barbaric?

At one level, it seems fairly arbitrary whether a particular conflict could be described as more barbaric than another, since all conflict involves violence. Nonetheless, the very concept of 'barbarisation' in warfare was developed by Bartov (1985) specifically in relation to the Eastern Front in the Second World War and is a concept that encompasses a number of different facets as well as underlying causes of the phenomena in question. Primarily, according to the Bartov thesis, the general descent of warfare into barbaric conditions was a function of the precise conditions at the front (including climactic ones) as well as the political indoctrination of the soldiers involved, and the general educational level of the junior officers in the armies that faced each other as well as their provenance in a socio-economic sense. In terms of the indoctrination at work, both the Nazi and Bolshevik systems of thought had profound Manichean or zero-sum elements in their thinking which ensured that rather than seeing conflict as a means of simply dividing up or apportioning territory or resources, the conflict in question became part of a far wider attempt to eliminate particular forces from existence. This was of course implicit in the Nazi view of the Jewish people but also in the notions of Lebensraum and living space in the East, along with the elimination of the Slavic peoples to make room for the Aryan master race, that were a central element within the political indoctrination of German soldiers. These elements helped ensure that from the point where the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union on 22nd June 1941 the Eastern front saw the majority of fighting in the whole of the war up to 1945, with more people fighting and dying there than on all the other fronts combined, as pointed out by Weinberg (1995, p.264).

The ideological nature of the conflict is also examined in detail by Ben Shepherd Hughes and Johnson (2005) who argues that the social Darwinist Nazi ideology that permeated the *Weltanschauung* and decision-making of the upper echelons of the Wehrmacht has been carefully inculcated well before the outbreak of hostilities. One of the ramifications of this was that increasingly from 1942 onwards the boundary between the enemy (particularly partisans) and civilians became ever more rapidly eroded. This was part of the entire notion of hygiene that was at the centre of Nazi thought: "Hitler identified the 'carriers of Bolshevism', the Soviet Union's 'Jew-Bolshevik intelligentsia' as a bacillus to be eradicated" (p.63). These ideas were specifically codified in the *Guidelines for the Conduct of the Troops in Russia* which was issued in May 1941 and conceived in such a manner as to "consolidate the mentality that could justify such ruthlessness in the first place".

This was then followed by the Barbarossa Decree that was promulgated six days later which denied civilians the protection of military courts, thus once again breaking down and destroying the distinction between civilian and combatant that was a feature of the entire concept of racial conflict and its transcendence of traditional national conflict. Again the Nazi state used law as a means not of limiting excesses but of actively promoting them: the Armed Forces High Command's December 1942 Directive, which was specifically disseminated on the orders of Hitler himself, actively prohibited Wehrmacht courts from prosecuting soldiers guilty of 'excesses' and also urged "the most brutal measures...against women and children also" (p.65). This virulence was of course an element of the entire Nazi ideology, which derived from a particular reading of social Darwinism that saw life as an absolute zero-sum process, but it is notable that the precise ferocity commanded right from the top of the Nazi hierarchy in relation to the approach on the Eastern Front could be contrasted with the attitude adopted in relation to, say, the conflict with the British who were seen as a superior race to the Russians.

Dear and Foot (2001, p.89) make the important point that not all officers in the German army followed these racial ideologies and the commandments towards a war of annihilation to the letter. However, it is the case that since the Nazis acceded to power in 1933 the institutions of the state were employed to promulgate as much propaganda as possible to prepare the Germans for total war and, moreover, to a war of brutality towards all those peoples around the world who were characterised as inferior racial stock. This approach was urged and exhorted from Hitler downwards; Dear and Foot also discuss the fact that Hitler demanded that not a single inch of ground was to be surrendered when there were numerous pleas from commanders for limited or partial withdrawals as a result of declining resources as the conflict proceeded on its course. When, ultimately, the war turned against the Germans, for Hitler this was a contravention of what he saw as the historical destiny of the Germans to triumph over an inferior race; when there were military reverses, for instance, he removed several commanders and enshrined himself as commander-in-chief of the army from Brauchitsch in December 1941 as a way of pointing out what was perceived as the inadequacies of the commanders who were not guiding the German historical destiny in the right way. This fallacious belief was a version of what the philosopher Karl Popper would characterise as a form of historicism – the belief in certain iron laws of history. This ensured that the German rank and file were forced to fight on to the bitter end rather than withdrawing or retreating, another crucial factor in the degeneration of the conflict into what Bartov characterised as barbarisation.

It is not the case that all those on the ground applied the same absolutist thinking in the conflict as those at the top of the command chains but in terms of the general debate, however, there is no doubt that the nature of fighting on the Eastern Front reached a ferocity that was exceptional within the wider history of warfare. As argued by Downes (2006, p.61), the experience of the Second World War and in particular the experiences of the barbaric nature of conflict on the Eastern Front has the longer-term ramification that after the end of the Second World War there was renewed pressure from a number of different quarters for there to be greater codification and ratification of legal norms that prohibited the use of force against non-combatants. Again, the existence of such virulent aggression both against opposing soldiers and against wider civilian populations was in part the result of particular ideology – either racial ideology that placed one group above another in a hierarchy on the one hand or, on the side of the Soviets, the class-based ideology of Marxism-Leninism which conditioned many to think of those outside the proletariat as class enemies who were worthy of being entirely eliminated. This was a major part of the mass rapes committed by the Red Army as it stormed eastern Germany and Berlin at the end of the Second World War that are described in harrowing detail by Beevor (2002).

In part the ferocity of the conflict on the Eastern front was the product of the sense of having been betrayed that lay at the heart of Stalin and the Soviet view of the actions of the Germans after they had reneged on the Nazi-Soviet Non Aggression Pact. Murray and Millett (2001, p.111), for example, point out that the Soviets repeatedly underestimated and misunderstood the Nazi designs on the Eastern front and continued to supply the Germans with raw materials right up to the inception of Operation Barbarossa; by June 1941 the Soviets had delivered 2.2 million tons of grain, 1 million tons of oil and 100,000 tons of cotton to the Germans. These deliveries, notably those of oil (which was a key part of the strategic importance of the later battle of Stalingrad which many commentators have seen as the turning-point of the entire Second World War), were vital for the Wehrmacht in the eventual invasion of the USSR itself.

This was, in part, the result of the failures of information exchange that lay at the heart of the Soviet system under Stalin; not merely was this an economic problem (particularly after the New Economic Policy or NEP was abandoned and collectivisation was

forced on the people) but also a military problem since information about the motives and plans of the Germans was repeatedly ignored or suppressed, particularly from the purge of the Red Army in the mid 1930s onwards. The deliveries of resources to the Germans continued despite the fact that deliveries in the opposite direction increasingly slowed – the Soviets simply did not appreciate the underlying planning that lay in the direction of Barbarossa. As a result, when the Nazis did renege on the Non Aggression pact, the Soviets therefore felt enormously and utterly betrayed. They were also therefore taken by surprise, as Roberts (2006, p.11) suggests, by the war of annihilation that the Nazis attempt to prosecute against them. This also explains the way that the war between the Third Reich and the USSR can be subdivided into two key periods: the first one involving the catastrophic early months of the German invasion when vast numbers of Soviet soldiers were encircled and captured (and mostly died in Nazi captivity as a result, again, of the notion of a war of annihilation) and then a second phase which ultimately ended in the Russian advance to Berlin – all with a calculated German retreat where the Wehrmacht were still able to inflict as many as 80,000 fatalities on the Red Army as late as April 1945.

Another central factor in the nature and scope of conflict on the Eastern front was the way in which the conflict became implicated in the Nazi ideology of anti-semitism, with the concentration camp archipelago created largely throughout Poland. This linked back to the Nazi conception that Bolshevism itself was a force that had strong Jewish elements and the belief that the Bolshevik leadership was composed of a large proportion of Jews which coloured the international cosmopolitanism of the movement and the concept of world revolution (an irony, perhaps, given the transition away from Comintern-led internationalism under Stalin and towards the notion of ‘socialism in one country’). This was also spurred, as noted by Evans (2009, p.209) by the rise of partisan groups organised by the Russians under conditions of German occupation and, moreover, by the existence and proliferation of Jewish partisan groups. The first Jewish resistance group was organised by Abba Kovner in Vilna in 1941 which were then rapidly followed by other partisan organisations in Belarus. These organisations understood the growing plans by the Third Reich for the eventual annihilation and elimination of the Jews from the world and so fought back with a marked virulence. Over the course of 1941 and 1942, increasingly the German and Polish auxiliary police were unable to cope effectively with the rising tide of partisan resistance and activity that was spawned by the harsh nature of German occupation.

A further important factor lay in the perspective adopted by the German high command in relation to the fighting ability of the Russians. Just as the Russians had underestimated the German desire to create Lebensraum in the east, destroy the Slavic race and propagate a war of annihilation (if they had have understood this, the Non Aggression Pact would presumably not have been created and ratified in the first place), so the Germans also misunderstood the long-term durability of morale amongst the Russians for whom the Second World War became what was described and discussed as the ‘Great Patriotic War’. This view went far beyond the question of Bolshevism or the Soviet system and become part of a much deeper root nationalistic drive to save the motherland or Russia itself – a strain that the Russians deployed in propaganda terms by reinvigorating cults of personality of former rulers such as Ivan the Terrible, rather than simply putting forward Marxist-Leninist cults of personality. This meant that the early successes of the Wehrmacht were taken as decisive when in fact they were simply opening gambits in a conflict that was to prove utterly attritional and involved ruthless and ferocious battles such as Stalingrad and Kursk.

The Nazi regime and its philosophy and aims effectively led to the growing transition whereby possible opponents of the Soviet regime, and in particular of the brutal realities of Stalinist rule, were alienated from potentially welcoming the Germans as liberators. This process, and the development of the conflict into a war of annihilation, led to the Russian

resistance to Barbarossa to become hardened and virulent after the early German successes of the encirclement period of the campaign. Megargee (2007, p.97) makes this precise point: that there was a close correlation between consciousness of the German regime's goals and worldview and the strength and force of the resistance that was provided to the Wehrmacht from both soldiers and civilians and of course the burgeoning partisan movement.

Despite various tactical and strategic errors on the part of the Soviet high command, this process of alienation led to the marshalling of the vast manpower at the disposal of the USSR: "At the front...German brutality was helping to inspire the Red Army to fanatical resistance. Given that fact, plus the Soviets' ability to come up with a seemingly endless succession of new units, the Germans' prospects for imposing a military solution [disappeared] even faster than their political opportunities". At the same time, and despite the enormous intransigence and inflexibility of the Soviet leadership in general terms, they did prove adaptable to some extent to changing realities on the ground; one key example was the relative relaxation of the importance of political propaganda and indoctrination amongst military officers in the battle of Stalingrad, which helped to prioritise victory rather than any of the wider goals of Communism. Again this represented some degree of a shift to a nationalistic approach to the survival of Russia which also helped to galvanise resistance to the invasion and harden it after the initial period of setbacks as the Nazi Blitzkrieg system took its characteristic early toll on its opponents.

Weinberg (1995, pp.265-6) sums up the intransigence of Nazi thought in this regard; the titling of work by Kershaw (2001) is also apposite here, since he subdivides his histories of Nazism into early hubris and later nemesis which encapsulates the problems involved in the way in which the German high command saw the world, particularly given their hubristic idea of the infallibility of Hitler's judgment that was drawn into the wider concept of the Fuhrer-prinzip. The fact that over 300,000 Russian soldiers were captured in the early encirclement battles of the campaign mistakenly gave the Germans the false view that they had destroyed Soviet military power with one hard blow. As an example, on 3rd July the German Army Chief of Staff General Franz Halder wrote in his diary that "On the whole, one can say that the assignment of smashing the mass of the Russian army before the Dvina and the Dnepr (rivers) has been fulfilled". Again the element of hubris entered into the equation with the following assertion by Halder that "It is probably not too much to say when I assert that the campaign against Russia has been won within two weeks". For both sides, therefore, the period prior to the launching of Barbarossa and the early stages of the campaign witnessed fundamental inabilities to engage with and deal with the actual realities on the ground; both sides were, therefore, not properly prepared for the long, drawn-out, attritional and stalemate nature of much of the fighting on the Eastern front as a whole. Again this tendency occurred in the battle of Stalingrad itself when Hitler asserted that the German Sixth army had a historical destiny to win the campaign, a belief that flew in the face of the actual realities on the ground.

This also relates, therefore, to the wider question of leadership involved in the conflict. On one side there was Hitler for whom the conflict was absolutely a matter of annihilation; his social Darwinist worldview offered only the bleak prospect of one side or the other being entirely obliterated, with no possibility of there being any medium ground whatsoever. On the other hand, the Soviet Union had already been brutalised during the Stalinist era through the pervasive purges, including that of the Red Army, and the collectivisation of agriculture and forced industrialisation which Stalin saw as inexorably connected both to the rise of the USSR as a world power and also to its very survival. Indeed, the purges of the Red Army from 1937 onwards, which witnessed vast tranches of some of the most talented officers being removed from their positions, were in part the result of Stalin's fear and suspicion that the west would attempt to attack the USSR, a fear which

played on the experience of western intervention in the USSR during the Russian civil war. This also explains the desperation of Stalin for the Nazi-Soviet Non Aggression Pact to work and for the late realisation that the Germans had no ultimate intention of honouring either its terms or its spirit. It is, in this context, almost a historical accident that the USSR allied with the west at all (a fact of realpolitik that was essentially forced by Barbarossa) and also hardly a surprise that the pre-existing tensions and suspicion resurfaced so rapidly after the end of the Second World War in the form of the Cold War. In this sense, the analysis by Bullock (1990) is particularly engaging for it shows how the two dictators of Hitler and Stalin had personal pathways and trajectories in life that formed many parallels. For both of them, the war could only turn into a war of annihilation.

There are commentators for whom the concept of specific barbarisation or exceptionalism in the conflict on the Eastern Front in the Second World War is a view that involves exaggeration. Hill (2005, p.17), for instance, argues that although the racism at the centre of National Socialism was a factor it was not only one in terms of barbarous actions on the ground. Moreover, Hill argues that the case can be overstated regarding the question of barbarity and ferocity particularly in the case of the partisan war: "Whilst the war in the East between the Soviet Union and the German-led Axis may be seen as a particularly brutal conflict, the extent to which the partisan war in the German rear was exceptional in twentieth-century war is debatable." Hill also argues further that the conflict has to be placed in the wider context of guerrilla warfare in general, where again there has been a blurring of the division between civilian and combatant that arises out of the very nature of asymmetric conflict: "The nature of guerrilla warfare, where the line between civilian and combatant is blurred more than usual, has meant that even in subsequent cases of anti-guerrilla wars involving democracies such as the United States, the number of civilian casualties compared to guerrillas (i.e. in this case the Vietcong) has been high". The comparison and implicit contrast is important since the conflict between the USA and the Vietcong did not contain the notions of racial superiority and inferiority which were a prime facet of the Nazi approach to the Eastern Front in the Second World War and their underlying ideological construct of Eastern Lebensraum.

Overall, therefore, there seems little doubt that the Bartov thesis accurately describes the nature of the ferocity of conflict on the Eastern front during the Second World War, though there are debates to be had about other conflicts throughout history many of which have obviously featured extreme barbarity and butchery. The reasons for this particular conflict having been so harsh are complex. In essence, the conflict descended into a war of annihilation that was also deeply attritional in the sense that the early attempts of the Nazis towards enacting Blitzkrieg were wholly inadequate given the size and scale of the Soviet Union but, on the other side of the equation, from Hitler's perspective surrender or withdrawal, even partial or temporary withdrawal for tactical reasons, was anathema given his concept of historical destiny and how that related to the Fuhrer-prinzip and his perceived role as the semi-messianic communicator of that destiny to his people. The intransigence and inflexibility of the German position all but guaranteed resistance and a response from the Soviets that was equally as intransigent.. Given the tensions that existed, it may have been possible for the Germans to follow the advice of Sun Tzu and avoid conflict and bring Russians over to their side as liberators; this might have led to a more successful military campaign, but formed no part of the Nazi worldview which was based on a social Darwinism that led inevitably to a war of annihilation against a Slavic race that they perceived of as entirely inferior, in contrast, say, to the British, with whom the conflict was rather different.

List of References

- Bartov, O, 1985. *The Eastern Front 1941-5: German troops and the barbarisation of warfare*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Beevor, A, 2002. *Berlin: The Downfall*. New York: Viking
- Dear, I and Foot, M, 2001. *The Oxford companion to World War II*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Downes, A, 2008. *Targeting civilians in war*. New York: Cornell University Press
- Evans, R, 2009. *The Third Reich at war, 1939-45*. Harmondsworth: Penguin
- Hill, A, 2005. *The war behind the Eastern Front: the Soviet partisan movement in North-West Russia 1941-44*. London: Routledge
- Hughes, M and Johnson, G, 2005. *Fanaticism and conflict in the modern age*. London: Routledge
- Kassimeris, G, 2006. *Warrior's dishonour: barbarity, morality and torture in modern warfare*. Aldershot: Ashgate
- Kershaw, I, 2001. *Hitler, 1936-45: Nemesis*. New York: W W Norton
- Megargee, G, 2007. *War of Annihilation: Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield
- Murray, W and Millett, A, 2001. *A war to be won: fighting the Second World War*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press
- Roberts, G, 2006. *Stalin's Wars: from World War to Cold War, 1939-1953*. New Haven, CA: Yale University Press
- Weinberg, G, 1995. *A world at arms: a global history of World War II*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

