



I

Just nineteen years old and already I had smelt the smoke, seen death and watched blood flow. My three months of experience of battle so far seemed like a game that had to be played. Then a minor offensive in the foothills of the Caucasus stopped me in my tracks and made me acutely aware for the first time, of my own mortality.

It was September 1942. There was a nest of Russian soldiers established on the top of a mountain, but we had no idea how many. We knew they were there because Russian fire had destroyed several trucks delivering supplies to our troops along the road below. We took up position at the foot of the mountain in thick beech cover, the first new growth after the trees had been harvested, and as dawn broke we started to advance.

The incline was not steep and initial progress was easy. Then we caught a momentary sight of the enemy who

immediately retreated, so we followed. They had some of these one-man mortars with a short barrel that fired shells about five centimetres in diameter. We Germans did not have such a small-calibre mortar.

The Russians pounded us with a salvo and scored one hit, an unlucky shot for us. The mortar fell on the lock of the machine-gun assigned to our group and shrapnel blasted open the machine-gunner's throat. His windpipe and carotid artery were severed. Blood squirted high, and then it slowed down and came in regular spurts according to the heartbeat, until, before long, it stopped altogether. Nobody could have helped him.

Eight young innocents, most still in their teens and not quite ready for this blooding, gazed stunned at the body slumped over the machine gun. A few minutes before he had been one of us, a joker and good comrade full of life. What a shocking way to go!

Then I witnessed an incredible sight. A white shining figure detached itself hesitantly from the body. When the apparition had completely emerged I recognised it as the machine-gunner whose earthly body still lay draped over the machine-gun. He looked around bewildered and searched the surroundings as if he did not know where he was. It must have been very confusing to find himself in a different form and dimension looking down at his old body. He stood there undecided as if expecting something to happen.

Then another figure materialised, this one dressed in a faded uniform showing evidence of wear and tear. The second figure approached our machine-gunner and they seemed to converse briefly. The machine-gunner was then led by his arm uphill. The two disappeared between the trees oblivious to the bullets flying around and then dematerialised.

II

I was drafted into the army on the 18th of April 1942, a day I hadn't looked forward to at all. I kept thinking to myself, what a waste of time and lives, being trained for the slaughter fields of war. My brother had spent some years in the army and had participated in all campaigns since the reunification with Austria. My father had been in the First World War, so I knew what to expect.

The 18th of April was selected as the call-up day because Hitler's birthday fell on the 20th of April. That enabled the High Command of the Armed Forces to report at the celebrations that recruit numbers had increased by so many hundreds of thousands,

I had just graduated as an engineer, Rudolf Stiebritz, Dipl. Bau-Ing. It sounded good, and as the youngest student in my course, I was proud of it. I wanted to work in my chosen field to gain experience so that eventually I could take over the family building business. I had dreamed of going to South America and to work there for a stint to gain some experience. The son of my godfather, a master carpenter, had gone to Argentina to work, which probably had put the idea into my head.

So on that fateful day when I had to report to the barracks of the Reserve Battalion No. 9 at Hanau on the river Main, I was apprehensive. Going through the gate meant saying goodbye to normal life. The first thing that struck me was the change in the manner of speech. Although the recruits still spoke normally amongst themselves, there was a sharply different tone of voice from those who spoke to us. Everyone shouted. My first shock came when the supply sergeant bellowed, "Take your hands off my desk and stand to attention when I speak to you!"

"My hands will not make your desk dirty."

He looked at me, anger burning in his eyes, and shouted again, “You cheeky arsehole. Who do you think you are? Get down and do twenty push-ups.”

I had not expected to be handled with velvet gloves, but had not anticipated such an unpleasant initiation. I must have gotten out of the wrong side of my bed that morning. ‘Oh, God,’ I thought, ‘what have I got into here? And this is to be my home for the next three months!’ The High Command considered this sufficient training time to prepare troops to die for the Fatherland.

The urgency was occasioned by Hitler’s need to replace the troops lost in his sudden and unexpected attack on the Soviet Union in Operation Barbarossa on June 22, 1941.

Western historians generally label Hitler the perfidious aggressor who forced a neutral and aloof Russia into the Second World War but that is an incorrect interpretation of the circumstances. It was the only opportunity for the Germans at the time to smash into the massive troop and armament deployment along the entire length of the western frontier of Russia. It was an attempt to save Germany and the whole of Europe from the formidable insurgency of Stalin’s military might.

Stalin harboured dreams of gathering all of the European and north Asian nations under the Soviet yoke, and as early as 1939 he had begun preparations to subvert all of Europe. He directed the entire Soviet economy towards armament production and by 1941 battle preparations were running in top gear.

By contrast the German armaments production which had been implemented around 1936 was stepped up considerably in 1942. By that date the war was effectively lost by Germany anyway. The German war machine reached the zenith of output in 1944.

The Russian force, deployed roughly north to south from the Baltic to the Black Sea, was the biggest amassment of

troops known in the history of civilisation. In offensive rather than defensive mode, they covered the borders with Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Romania and were ready to move west across Europe. By early 1941 Stalin had about five million men under arms, distributed into 295 divisions organised into 16 armies, and had planned to mobilise another six million by summer 1941.

How did we know the Russians were in offensive rather than defensive mode? When a country prepared to defend itself against attack, the frontier areas were mined, tank traps and ditches were dug, and heavy artillery emplacements and obstacles to halt progress were erected. The troops were deployed at depth to ward off possible incursions.

Aggressors prepared differently. The border areas were cleared of mines, obstacles, ditches and tank traps in order to enable unhindered forward movement of troops, which were amassed along the frontier ready for advance. Their heavy weapons were mobile rather than mounted and formed the second line of attack.

German soldiers encountered these conditions exactly in the 1941 early summer attack.

Further irrefutable evidence of offensive plans was uncovered. Apart from the standard models for use at home, Russian designers had invented an ingenious tank aeroplane (the Soviet KT A-40) for use in more developed countries where the roads were sealed. (Russia had no sealed roads across the country until after the war ended.) On landing, the tank section was easily detached from the wings and tail and then proceeded on its own caterpillar traction through the target country.

Our units never encountered any of these remarkable devices because Operation Barbarossa rendered them useless as war weapons in Russia itself. But our soldiers who fought in the Barbarossa attacks discovered their design and the factories

for their construction. Likewise they found discarded Russian high speed Mark BT tanks, reputed to be capable of speeds up to 100 km/h on well-developed roads such as the new German Autobahnen and Italy's Autostrada. These tanks ran on caterpillar tracks on less modern roads, but to achieve maximum speed these tracks could be discarded in favour of the solid rubber tyres underneath. BT tanks were designed specifically for offensive operations in which masses of tanks poured into enemy territory and took them by surprise.

Yet another Russian initiative was the development and manufacture of amphibious tanks, presumably for use in the Baltic and Black Sea regions. Russia was the first country in the world with such mobility. As with the BTs these had to be cast aside when the Germans engaged the Russians on their home ground.

Modern historians often quote that Hitler was the aggressive warmonger. This is on the basis that Germany had a fleet of 57 submarines when they attacked. At that time the Russian navy had more than 100 modern-for-the-time submarines, which was one of the largest fleets in the world.

At the start of the Second World War Germany had 4000 para-troops, at which time the Red Army is supposed to have had more than all other countries in the world put together. Some war historians estimate the number at around one million. It would be virtually impossible to use air assault forces of this magnitude in defence. In fact, had Stalin developed a defence stratagem as effective as his offensive preparations, his counter to the German attack would have proved even more disastrous for the German forces.

Peter the Great (1689-1725) sowed the first seeds of Russian Imperialism, exposing a desire to conquer all of Europe and bring it under the feudal system that operated under his reign. After the Russian revolution of 1917, Lenin pursued a similar ambition—and Stalin followed Lenin's dream.

Hitler, more so than the leaders of Britain, France or the United States of America, understood Stalin's goal of pan-Imperialism, or more accurately pan-Slavism.

In fact in 1937 he had already discussed with Lord Halifax, then lord privy seal under prime minister Chamberlain of Great Britain, the possibility of a general war in Europe and in that event the probability of a Russian victory as the outcome. But Halifax, like his fellow European leaders responsible for defence portfolios, dismissed Hitler's theory as paranoia.

Recent revisionist studies and subsequent publications have given credence to Russia's role as the aggressor whose advance was pre-empted by Hitler's intervention.¹

Given the nature of his hastily conceived plan, Hitler understood that his chances of winning this initial attack were slight. He understood where the greatest danger was coming from, and given that intelligence, he had to act rapidly and decisively. It was already too late for him to win the war, a reality he couldn't conceive at the time. Now it can be stated that in smashing the great Soviet military build up in 1941, Hitler dashed Stalin's plan to quickly conquer Europe. Therefore, in spite of his defeat in 1945, Hitler saved at least the western half of Europe—which means millions of people—from the horror of Soviet subjugation.

1.

'Russian Specialist Lays Bare Stalin's Plan to Conquer Europe' by Joseph Bishop, *The Journal of Historical Review* – Vol. 16, No. 6 November/December 1997, USA).

'Icebreaker' by Victor Suvorov, London; Hamish Hamilton, 1990

'DerTag M' by Victor Suvorov, German translation from the Russian by Hans Häger: Stuttgart; Klett-Cotta 1995.

'Stalin's Krieg' by Ernst Topisch, England; St. Martin's Press, 1987

'Hitler's Panzer East' World War II Reinterpreted' by R.H.S.Stolfi, University Oklahoma Press 1993 (paperback).

The campaigns against Poland, France and Greece had also been blitzkriegs and so lasted a few weeks only. The losses there had not been very high, considering the number of troops involved, but in 1942 the need for reserves was much higher as the campaign in Russia moved into its second year.

If the surprise attack against Russia resulted in enormous losses, the following winter helped the Russian cause. Hundreds of thousands of Germans lost limbs through frostbite alone. The planning for the supply of winter clothing that year had gone wrong because the winter started four weeks earlier, taking everybody by surprise.

Given that history already provided a salutary example, the German High Command should have been prepared for this eventuality. In 1812, a bitter Russian Winter treated Napoleon's army in much the same way as it affected the German Army in 1941. In the earlier case it led to Napoleon's downfall, yet here was a German army rendered almost ineffectual by similar weather without the issue of special winter uniforms.

The Russians being used to their harsh winter made the most of it and started some very effective counter offensives. There had also been the tank battle near Kursk some months earlier, where hundreds of German tanks had been destroyed because the early winter had stopped the supply of diesel for their tanks.

My brother came home on holiday early in 1942 and he told me about this disaster and also about the frostbite fiasco amongst the troops at the front-line. Further he explained how some of the soldiers had exposed themselves to freezing on purpose, just to escape the awful schemozzle.

So that is a thumbnail picture of my war. Or at least the war to which I had been unwillingly conscripted, and which had such a profound effect on the rest of my life.

III

Following these events was not a propitious start for this new recruit. I received my basic training in Hanau. It was very exhausting, especially in the first few weeks, until the muscles got used to that strenuous exertion, but in general it was not too bad. Every night we slept like tops. As we toughened up, the training became somewhat easier.

The sergeant, our teacher, was a good man. He had been wounded in France where he had front-line experience. He had taken part in the campaigns in Poland, France and Greece. Wounding always makes a man somehow softer inside, even if he presents a tough exterior. He tried to convey his battle experience to us as well as he could so that we had a realistic idea of what lay ahead of us.

Nothing exciting really happened during these months of training. Because of my engineering degree, they selected me as a reserve officer. There were a number of boys with the leaving certificate and also several who started engineering courses. My group consisted mostly of boys like that.

It was actually surprising how many of the recruits had great difficulty comprehending simple tasks, like operating the lock of the rifle, for example. It is a very simple procedure to take it apart and put it together again but there were a number of boys amongst the recruits who took a long time before they could master it. I quickly discovered how many apparently sensible people are slow or lack manual dexterity.

When the training period was finished, all these fine young recruits were sent out to the frontier for slaughter. Slaughter is the most appropriate word here, because the three months of training were far too short. The losses amongst my recruit group in their first battle experience were very high. Losses in

the earlier stages of the war were comparatively lower because the troops had been thoroughly trained in peacetime.

IV

I did not get assigned to the battle unit. Rather, I stayed on at the Reserve Battalion because somehow they had overlooked me in the selection process. Every morning the staff sergeant gave us some duties. I tried to stay as inconspicuous as possible. However, one morning he wanted some people to work in the garden, mostly to weed the strawberries which were reserved for the officers' mess. He selected one boy and me and we were told not to eat any of the precious berries. They were such a lovely red colour and because they were of the smaller variety the aroma was so enticing and strong that naturally I ate some of these scrumptious berries with great relish.

Some hours later the staff sergeant came past to check on us. The little bloke, working with me, dobbed me in at once, the lousy bastard. The staff sergeant approached me and asked, "Why are you still here? You should have gone with the others to the front in the last contingent."

"I do not know. I was selected to be a Reserve Officer."

The staff sergeant walked off. A short while later a messenger arrived and ordered me to report to the company office at once. Here the staff sergeant told me off for eating those precious strawberries and also lectured me for not telling him about my staying behind when all the others had been shipped out. I had not done so because, according to the advice of my father and brother, it was always better to keep your head down and avoid drawing attention to yourself. The little pimp had changed that. I had not expected to be dobbed in for a few strawberries. Well, you live and learn. There are always some around who try to ingratiate themselves at someone else's expense.

The staff sergeant told me to move into another room where I was to supervise the men there, a group of men in their forties. Also, I was to be assistant to the teaching sergeant. These changes meant my idle time was over.

A particular incident during exercises with the pontoons on the River Main comes to mind from the training days. One man, who had an engineering degree from one of the technical universities, had a nervous breakdown. The physical stress of the army training had been too much for him and he just refused to continue. The sergeant in charge of the platoon asked him several times to change his mind but he was determined to quit. The soldier was told to sit to one side and wait and was later taken away to the barracks. We never saw him again. We were also never told what had happened to him. That was the first really disturbing impression I gained since I had been called up to enter the pioneer section of the army.

My time as instructor's assistant lasted for about four weeks, then I was sent out to the frontier. The group I was attached to were replacements for the 125th Infantry Division. We were loaded into goods wagons for a very slow trip to the frontier in Southern Russia.

Often we were shunted onto a sidetrack for hours to let other trains pass. At one of these occasions somewhere in the Ukraine, we stood on the opposite side of the platform from a heavily guarded train which we were forbidden to approach. We could hear some moaning from what we assumed were Russian prisoners of war in the wagons. I was wondering at that time why we couldn't go near them. That also left me with an uncomfortable feeling about our treatment of the enemy, a mixture of inhumanity and lack of compassion.

At another spot some days later we again waited for hours. On the other side of the tracks some distance away people were working. They were constructing wooden trusses. The activity