

Introduction

Two Unexpected Happenings

The bomb itself was not particularly large—250 kilograms—yet large enough to start a war. Grey as winter twilight, it was clutched under the plane of Lieutenant Sakamoto Akira, the carrier *Zuikaku*'s dive-bomber commander. At precisely 0745, 7 December 1941, Sakamoto led his flock of dark-green sea eagles swooping down into their dives on Oahu Island's Wheeler Field.¹ American pilots, mechanics, and administrative personnel stumbled out of their barracks and mess halls into a deafening hell of explosions, screaming aircraft, staccato strafing, and the cries of wounded and dying men. Plenty of U.S. servicemen had suspected war was coming with Japan; none of them expected to be where it started.

Ten miles farther south and less than ten minutes later, swarms of Japanese aircraft began attacking the naval anchorage at Pearl Harbor from all points of the compass. American sailors standing on the decks of the dreadnaughts moored at Battleship Row had the uniquely horrifying experience of witnessing low-flying planes speeding toward them over the Southeast Loch. They could only watch helplessly as sleek torpedoes be-



I-1. Pearl Harbor ablaze, with the listing USS *West Virginia* gutted by seven torpedoes and lying sunk in the foreground, and the wounded USS *Tennessee* behind her. Heavy smoke from the destroyed USS *Arizona* is billowing at right. (U.S. Naval Historical Center)

gan slapping into the water, their wakes extending like accusing fingers. The attackers, wings emblazoned with the Rising Sun, pulled up and flashed overhead. Seconds later, oily geysers began heaving themselves thunderously skyward. The soaring water columns seemed to greet yet more bombs that came hurtling down from phalanxes of Japanese level bombers looming high overhead. After the first attack wave was done, a second came rolling in. Over the course of two hours, Japan's airmen mauled the unprepared Americans in a lopsided contest.

The U.S. Navy lost five battleships. *Arizona* was demolished by a bomb that detonated her forward magazines, killing two-thirds of her crew in an instant. *Oklahoma* capsized after multiple torpedo hits, with hundreds drowning in her inverted, pitch-black innards. *West Virginia* and *California* were both ripped by torpedoes, but settled upright on the harbor's shallow bottom instead of rolling over. *Nevada* was intentionally beached to prevent her from sinking in the main channel. Three more battlewagons were damaged.

Even as they savaged the anchorage, the Japanese simultaneously struck all the main airfields on Oahu. American airpower was nearly exterminated, with 350 aircraft destroyed or damaged, and their airbases smashed. Vast smoke columns were soon rising across the island. Burning ships, blazing aircraft, and wrecked hangars all contributed to the pall of destruction cast over the hub of American sea power in the Pacific. More than 2,400 Americans were dead or dying. Congress still had to file the paperwork, but the United States was now at war.

As it happened, merely two days before Pearl Harbor, a second, equally unlikely military event had occurred. The Soviet Red Army, having spent the previous five months staggering through what had been the most massive military disaster in human history—with millions of Soviet soldiers dead or captured, and more than a third of its citizens now behind enemy lines—stopped the German Army at the gates of Moscow. Whereas America's entrance into the war had been set in a tropical paradise, Germany's defeat before Moscow happened under conditions more befitting a Nordic version of hell. Two German armored pincers converging on the Soviet capital had reached the limits of human and mechanical endurance. With temperatures plunging dozens of degrees below freezing, and snow deep on the ground, German tanks, artillery, and small arms literally froze solid. The men were exhausted. The Wehrmacht simply could go no further. Then the Soviets counterattacked. At 0300 on the bitterly cold night of 5 December, the Red Army sent forward dozens of carefully hoarded fresh divisions. The Germans were taken completely by surprise. Over the next several days, fighting began erupting across the line in front of Moscow.

In terms of immediate military impact on a war that now spanned the globe, the USSR holding onto its capital city was more important than the entrance of the U.S. into the conflict. America was woefully under-armed and far from its likely battlefields, so its contribution to the war couldn't help but be delayed. But if Moscow fell, and the Soviets went down, eventual victory over the Axis was going to be terribly difficult for the Western Allies, and maybe impossible. At the beginning of the summer, most informed observers had already written the Soviets off. The Wehrmacht had already crushed Poland, humiliated France, run the British off the continent three times, and captured most



I-2. White-smocked Red Army soldiers move to the attack outside Moscow. The photo is likely staged, but still gives a good idea of the terrain and Soviet equipment. Note in particular the high percentage of automatic weapons in the form of PPSH-41 submachine guns, the effective camouflage of Soviet winter gear, and the ubiquitous *valenki* felt boots of the Red Army soldiers. (Archive Collection / Alamy Images)

of Europe in the process. When the Soviets' turn had come in June, Germany's panzer formations had handed the Red Army a series of almost unimaginable catastrophes. No nation had survived such a fearful beating—four million soldiers killed or captured in five months. Yet now, in early December, there was renewed hope. The Soviets had been brought to their knees, but had managed to parry the final sword stroke of their enemy. Russia would live to see the spring.

Would that actually matter?

The title of this book is meant to convey that 1942 was *the* critical year of World War II, and its tipping point. With the entrance of the Japanese and the United States into the war, all the major players were now fully in the game. It was do-or-die time. For the Axis, 1942 afforded their first opportunity to act as a genuine military alliance, and to demonstrate whether their vaunted martial prowess could secure the globe-spanning empires they aspired to. For the Allies, conversely, this year was to be the ultimate test of their military and organizational competence, their resilience, and their ability to transform themselves under the pressures of total war.

The beginning of the year witnessed Germany, Italy, and Japan inflict a series of humiliating defeats on the Allies, pushing them to the brink of defeat. In North Africa, German and Italian forces advanced east for much of the year, threatening the vital Suez Canal and the equally critical British oil fields beyond it. In the Atlantic, the U-boat menace assumed terrifying proportions, sinking millions of tons of shipping, imperiling the Allied war effort, and threatening to starve Great Britain into submission. In four short months in the Pacific, Imperial Japan ripped the Allied strategic position to shreds, crushing the British, Dutch, and American forces in its way; isolating China; and carving out one of history's largest empires. The picture was one of Allied weakness, ineptitude, and unpreparedness. The U.S. Army, facing a global war in which the Germans and Soviets were deploying more than 200 divisions apiece, had only one fully trained division to its name at the beginning of the year.² The American economy was better suited to cranking out refrigerators than weapons, while the Soviet economy was on the brink of disintegration. All in all, the picture by mid-year was one of utter calamity.

Though the Battle of Midway—which saw four Japanese aircraft carriers destroyed—bought some breathing room for the Allies in June, the war's outcome teetered on a knife's edge throughout the summer months. While the Soviet counterattack during the winter of 1941–42 had saved Moscow, it hadn't destroyed the Wehrmacht. In late spring, the Germans handed the Red Army fresh defeats in the Crimea and at Kharkov, then launched a second massive summer offensive in June. In a month's time they captured a huge chunk of southern Russia, and were driving on the Caucasus and its vital oil fields. By July, with his army apparently falling apart, Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin issued Order No. 227, calling for the immediate execution of any soldier abandoning his post without permission. The Soviet home front was nearing collapse. That same month, the Germans cut the USSR's northern Lend-Lease supply line by nearly annihilating convoy PQ-17 as it was bringing desperately needed cargo to Archangel.

On the island of Malta, critical to the Allied Mediterranean position, the British garrison was reduced to a couple weeks' worth of cooking kerosene, diesel, and other fuels. Only the timely arrival of a decimated convoy comprising a handful of merchantmen and a nearly foundering American tanker—pushed through at terrible cost—prevented the island from surrendering, and thereby ceding the central Mediterranean to the Axis. The British Army in Africa, meanwhile, had been routed again in June by Rommel's *Panzerarmee Afrika*, shoved back past the Egyptian frontier, and was in danger of being driven from the field. In September, on Guadalcanal, a Japanese attack came within a few hundred yards of overrunning the American 1st Marine Division's headquarters, which might have ended that crucial campaign then and there. In November, with a powerful Japanese naval force bearing down on that same island, the Americans could scrape up just six ships to face them, including their last two modern battleships in the South Pacific. Back in Russia, Stalingrad's few remaining defenders had been chopped apart and shoved back to a handful of tiny enclaves. None of the Soviet soldiers left alive in the city's ruins—and there weren't many—was more than a stone's throw from the Volga. They literally had their backs against the wall.

Throughout these ordeals, though, the Allies displayed remarkable grit and adaptability. By the end of the year, the tide had turned in their favor. By late November,

it was the Axis that was handed defeats at El Alamein, Guadalcanal, New Guinea, and Stalingrad. They had been forced to permanently relinquish the strategic initiative in North Africa, the Pacific, and the Eastern Front. They were now on the defensive and desperately mobilizing their economies for a protracted struggle, one for which they hadn't planned.

How did this surprising turnaround happen so comparatively quickly? These are the fundamental issues addressed in this book.

There Was No Single Turning Point

Students of military history are obsessed with the notion of “turning points,” and “decisive battles,” wherein the outcome of a certain event portends an inevitable outcome for a larger conflict. As co-author of a book on the Battle of Midway, I've been living with that battle's “decisiveness”—real or imagined—for decades now, and have spent a great deal of time pondering what those terms actually mean. During that same span of time, it has also become increasingly fashionable in World War II scholarship to point to the failure of Germany's Operation BARBAROSSA (variously fixed in either the summer or fall of 1941, depending on the scholar) as the point past which Hitler could no longer win the war, and Axis defeat was assured—making it perhaps the biggest “turning point” of all.³

On the face of it, this ascendance of what might be called “Eastern Front determinism” makes a certain amount of sense. After all, the Eastern Front was unquestionably the biggest theater of the war, involving the greatest number of troops, and the largest military and civilian casualties. It is likewise inarguable that the Soviet Union's defeat would have made victory for the Western Allies more difficult, and maybe impossible. It stands to reason, then, that the failure of Nazi Germany—the Axis coalition's most powerful member—to knock out the USSR with its opening campaign in 1941 guaranteed the long-term victory of the Allies as a whole.

This argument mirrors deterministic arguments that became popular in the late 1980s regarding the economic disparities between the two alliance blocs. Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* argues that once the Soviet Union brought the Germans to a halt outside Moscow, and the Americans had joined the fray, whatever tactical wizardry the Axis militaries managed to conjure up on the battlefield “could not obviate the fact that the Allies possessed *twice* the manufacturing strength. . . , *three* times the ‘war potential,’ and *three* times the national income of the Axis powers.” And while these figures say nothing about the relative lethality of the weapons being produced, or the skill of the opponents, it was obvious, wrote Kennedy, that “In the battle of the swordsmiths, the Allies were very clearly winning.” This led Kennedy to conclude that “in a protracted and full-scale coalition war, the countries with the deepest purse had prevailed in the end.”⁴

Kennedy's thinking emphasized economics and industrial production. However, Richard Overy's *Why the Allies Won* widened the perspective, by both acknowledging the critical importance of the Allies' economic advantages in the conflict, and pushing back on the notion of economic determinism, while exploring the wider moral, political, organizational, and technological issues at play in the conflict. The Allies couldn't win

the war by virtue of their larger wallets alone. They had to fight, and fight well, when things looked really bleak. As Overy wrote, “The explanation of Allied victory requires a broad canvas and a wide brush.”⁵ I agree.

War is not just an economics exercise. Nor is it strictly a military exercise. With respect to the largest struggle within the Second World War—Germany versus the USSR—it is well to remember that only 25 years earlier, during the First World War, the Central Powers had forced Russia to sue for peace, despite the Kaiser’s army being fully engaged on three fronts. In 1942, the vast bulk of the German Army was still concentrated on just *one* front, and economic and demographic factors were much more in its favor than in 1916.⁶ Why, then, did Germany not prevail in 1942? The simple answer is that world wars aren’t simple. They are sprawling, complex beasts that defy easy explanations. Numbers don’t tell the whole story.

Even as it follows the trajectory of a single year, this book seeks to capture that larger story. With all due respect to the recent scholarship on the Eastern Front, I remain unpersuaded by reductionist analyses regarding the primacy of BARBAROSSA to the outcome of the war as a whole. The interpretational pendulum has swung too far in that direction, in the process both obscuring the scope of combat and human suffering in, for example, China since 1937, and often ignoring the interconnections between the war’s various theaters. Accepting Eastern Front determinism also means accepting that the general outcome of the Second World War was in essence decided before Japan and America had even entered the broader global conflict.

The Second World War was the most complex and destructive conflict in human history, involving more than 100 million soldiers, and harnessing the efforts of billions of people. The war set in motion vast and evolving national systems of economic mobilization, finance, and science that, while human constructs, were in some ways outside human control. At a minimum, a BARBAROSSA-centered argument of inevitable Soviet and Allied victory means making a lot of bold assumptions regarding the Red Army’s qualitative transformation, the durability of the Soviet domestic economy, the survival of Soviet morale, and the scope of Lend-Lease aid. None of these were by any means assured. If one believes in the notions of causality and contingency, then even if the Germans were doomed to defeat after the failure of BARBAROSSA, they were not doomed to lose in exactly the manner they did, nor on the same timetable.

If there was a true “turning point” in the war as a whole, it happened not in 1941, but during the whole course of 1942. Rather than being tied to a single event (even one as massive as BARBAROSSA), the scales of the conflict were shifted by a number of smaller inflection points. Each can be summarized with a question, the answers to which, cumulatively, compose the answer to the most important matter of all: *who was going to win this war?*

For Germany, three primary issues loomed as 1942 dawned:

- Could the Wehrmacht survive, and then recover from the Red Army’s counterattack outside the gates of Moscow?
- Could Germany also seize the oil it needed—at the USSR’s expense—to fight a protracted, multi-front war?

- Finally, could the Wehrmacht revive the seeming invincibility it had displayed the summer of 1941, and force the Red Army to collapse?

For Italy, Germany's continental ally, the questions the year 1942 posed were more mundane, and yet more fundamental:

- Could the Italian economy, already straining, manage to continue its war effort?
- Could the Italian military, the smallest of the three major Axis powers, continue contributing to the larger war effort?

For Japan, the final Axis power to take the world's stage, and a critical player in the bloc's quest for world domination, there were also three primary questions at play in 1942:

- Could Japan's opening offensive seize the Southern Resource Area (Malaya and the Dutch East Indies) and secure the strategic minerals and oil it needed to fight a protracted war?
- Could Japan's opening blows compel the United States to seek a negotiated settlement, rather than fighting the war to a finish?
- If a diplomatic settlement wasn't in the cards, could Japan erect a defensive barrier that would make the American counterattack so costly that it would settle for less than total victory?

For the Allies, these same questions had to be answered in reverse, but others also loomed. For the United States, which was potentially the most powerful, and yet at the start of 1942 also the least militarized of the world's powers, there were four:

- Could the U.S. economy quickly move onto a wartime footing, and begin contributing to the larger Allied cause?
- Could the American military create the administrative and logistical apparatus necessary to fight a global war?
- Could the U.S. and Britain hammer out a credible strategy for joint military action somewhere in 1942, and then demonstrate that they could work together on the battlefield?
- Could the U.S., along with the other Allies, manage to field military forces of sufficient quality to fight the Japanese and Germans?

For Great Britain, the questions it faced in 1942 were central to its continuing existence as an island nation and colonial power:

- Could the British hang onto their Pacific holdings in the face of Japan's onslaught?
- Could the Royal Navy contain the U-boat menace, which threatened to starve Britain into submission?
- Could the British stave off defeat in North Africa and the Middle East?

- Could the Royal Air Force's strategic bombing campaign begin making a decisive impact on the war?

For the Soviet Union, Germany's most powerful antagonist in 1942, the questions spoke to both military and economic needs:

- Could the Red Army, which had suffered a series of almost unimaginable calamities, transform itself into a force capable not just of fighting the Wehrmacht, but also taking the offensive against it in a battle of maneuver?
- Could the devastated Soviet economy supply sufficient weaponry to its armed forces?
- Could that same economy also manage to keep its domestic population fed and housed, to avoid total collapse?

And lastly, for China, the oft-forgotten fourth major Allied power, the questions of 1942 were twofold:

- After four years fighting almost entirely on its own, could China survive another year of war with Japan?
- If so, could China rise above its defensive stance and make a significant contribution to the larger Allied war effort?

The cumulative answers to these questions, I believe, reveal how 1942 unfolded. The answers to some of them would be evident very shortly, and most would be clear by the year's end. Throughout the book, I will both echo them, and consider their effects on the conflict.

"It Sure Wasn't Obvious at the Time!"

These seven words should remain front and center when reading any book about the Second World War's early years. Because if the Axis had already lost the war by the end of 1941, it certainly wasn't apparent to them. Nor was the outcome at all obvious to senior Allied leaders, or to the average man or woman on the streets of New York, London, or Moscow. Indeed, as the new year began, to all outward appearances, the Axis was simply continuing an almost unbroken string of victories for the totalitarian states stretching back to the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1935. The mood for the Allies during much of 1942 was decidedly grim. As Dwight Eisenhower recalled later, "None of us, not even the most sincere and analytical, can recapture in his own heart and mind the fears and worries of those days." General Alan Brooke, who had perhaps the sharpest mind (and tongue) of any of the British military chiefs, confided his misgivings to his diary throughout the conflict, remarking in March 1942, after a string of British disasters, "During the last fortnight I have had for the first time since the war started a growing conviction that we are going to lose this war unless we control it very differently and fight it with more determination. . . It is all desperately depressing." The mood in the USSR, which was shouldering the heaviest human burden of the war, was similarly grim

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as fears mounted through the fall about the contest being waged in southern Russia. “Without exception, we are all worried about Stalingrad,” wrote one Soviet officer as late as October.⁷ Their reasons were real enough, though time and hindsight may have hidden them from view.

The truth is that 1942 was the only year either side could have shaped a course to ultimate victory. It was, simply put, a nail-biter—evenly matched, and full of unknowns: unlikely heroes, unanticipated victories, and unforeseen defeats that confounded all observers. It was a year of pure contingency. Had the Allies proven less resilient, less creative, less determined, less organized; had they failed to use every resource at their disposal; had they fought any less desperately at places like Guadalcanal, Alamein, Stalingrad, and the icy waters of the North Atlantic, the Axis might have driven one or more of them from the war. Particularly in the case of the Soviet Union, this would have proven ruinous to the fortunes of the remaining three.

Throughout the early part of 1942, the Axis held the initiative, and they were determined to capitalize on it. Hitler, Tōjō, and Mussolini realized the all-or-nothing nature of the gamble they were making, and well understood the overriding imperative of reaching a favorable conclusion to the war as rapidly as possible, rather than submitting to the grim attritional math of a longer struggle. As Admiral Yamamoto famously noted, he would “run wild” in the first year of a war, but if it went on longer than that, “I have no expectation of success.”⁸ Yet to Hitler, the entrance of Japan into the war opened a window.⁹ The Führer noted both the danger and the opportunity of the moment when he remarked later that “the Japanese alliance has been of exceptional value to us.”¹⁰ With the emperor’s soldiers running amok in the Pacific, the heat would be off Germany for a while, giving it time to finish off the Soviets and then turn to face the West with renewed reserves of both petroleum and morale. If the Axis could pull that off, they would have a good chance of prevailing. If they fell short, they would be faced with a gathering landslide of Allied matériel.

It is to the world’s lasting benefit that the Axis ultimately *did* fail, not only through bad luck (as they might have claimed), but also through poor organization, faulty decision-making, and sub-optimal resource utilization. Simultaneously, though, the Allies were far from waiting for victory to be dropped into their laps. They were fighting for it, and in the process transforming into much more effective opponents. Bit by bit during this crucial year—with an ample supply of missteps along the way—the Allies began forging order out of chaos, marshaling their economies, reforming their militaries, and creating the strategies and tactics that would lead to victory.