

Newsweek

SEPTEMBER 7, 1942

Hell at Stalingrad



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German target: Stalingrad railroads

We try to make for a village which we think we can see in the darkness. But no houses confront us—it is a high wooden wall. Invisible antitank guns fire at us . . . and suddenly a flood of liquid fire seems to shoot out . . . Flame throwers which fire automatically have been built into the wall. One of our tanks must have hit a wire leading to . . . the flame throwers. It is hell—devilish hell.

That was a German correspondent's report on the fighting in Russia last week. The most devilish hell on the 2,000-mile front was the battleground before Stalingrad, in the dusty, 50-mile-wide bottleneck between the Don and the Volga. After two months' furious fighting, the great German offensive begun on June 28 approached its climax. With but 60 days left before winter's onset, Hitler threw in the works—a gigantic bludgeon of tanks, planes, motorized infantry, and air-borne troops—in a supreme effort to take Stalingrad, drive on to the Caspian, and cut Russia in two before snowfall.

The sun-scorched, prairie-like battlefield boiled up into an "ocean of flames." The backdrop was Stalingrad itself, the sprawling 31-mile-long city whose great smokestacks and factories etch the flat horizon on the west bank of the Volga. From amid these plants and the residential areas of airy green-carpeted squares and white apartment buildings, fire and smoke billowed into the sky. Nazi dive bombers were trying to give Stalingrad the same treatment that Warsaw and Rotterdam got.

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Life in the city quickened. Supply barges, mooring at Volga docks after escaping enemy bombers, were unloaded five times faster than usual. Civilians were evacuated. Houses were turned into miniature fortresses. And into Stalingrad's outer defenses, a great system in depth of pill-boxes, mine fields, trenches, antitank traps, and artillery redoubts, poured a great army of citizen soldiers.

The chief danger to Stalingrad came from the northwest, where the Germans were pouring reinforcements through the Don bridgehead they had established below Kletskaya (see map) and only about 30 miles from Stalingrad. Here the Nazi columns struck toward the railroad leading northward from the city. At the same time, the other arm of the Nazi pincers thrust northeastward toward the city from Kotelnikov.

To explode Soviet mine fields, the Germans fired the sun-parched grass. Then tanks and motorized infantry burst through the smoke and into furious battles with Red tanks and artillery. Besides artillery and tanks, the Russians relied heavily on extremely mobile mortar detachments. Casualties on both sides were terrific—in the Kotelnikov area the Germans were said to be charging over mounds of their own dead.

The Reds also sought to slow the German onslaught by attacking in the central and northern zones of the great front from the Baltic to the Caucasus. The chief stratagem was a determined offensive against Rzhev, key point of a German salient pointing toward Moscow. Announcing the offensive after it was fifteen days old, Moscow on Aug. 26 reported a 25- to 30-mile gain over a wide front, including liberation of three towns, destructions or capture of 574 tanks, and the killing of 45,000 Germans. This week, fighting raged in the streets of Rzhev as the Germans admitted "strong attacks" in this region, at Voronezh, and elsewhere.

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