

Barbarism in WWII

Throughout history, wars have always been categorized as a barbaric affair, invaders who bring war are often referred to as barbarians. The notion of a good and clean war between two sides is more of a myth than a reality. The twentieth century saw two of the most brutal and barbaric wars human kind has ever seen. There is no telling what barbaric effects war will cause in people when their country and life are on the line. When a war is the be all end all a population, the ideas of war time laws are thrown out the window, people will do whatever it takes to survive. Usually wars never come to this, most times civilians and soldiers do not feel like if they lose a battle, they will have lost their lives. Wars tend to be about geopolitical aims and territories. However, when a war becomes about ideology, that is when peoples lives start to become endangered. When both sides in the war firmly believe that the other side is evil and that the only way the world will be peaceful is if the other side is annihilated, this is when wars becomes barbaric. World War II is the most recent example of a barbaric war, Nazi Germany believed they were the master race and that all others were inferior and needed to be eliminated. While Soviet Russia believed that their entire existence was in jeopardy due to Nazi beliefs. The Eastern Front of World War II was the most deadly and barbaric theatre of the war. Out of the 70 million that died in all of WWII, 30 million deaths occurred on the Eastern Front¹.

Germany and Russia both believed that if the other were to win the war, they would eliminate them. There was differing ideologies behind the two countries, one that led them into direct conflict with each other. This fear between the two nations led them to fight for their lives

¹ G. I. Krivosheev. *Soviet Casualties and Combat Losses*. (Greenhill, 1997)

with everything they had. There were no wrongs to commit in wartime because all actions were required to win the war. It did not matter if towns and villages were burned in the process because if the Nazis or Russians won, those towns and villages would be burned anyways. The German government was able to corrupt the minds of soldiers and civilians into believing that the Russians were savages intent on destroying Germany and killing all its people. This led the German army to be especially brutal on the Eastern Front when they invaded in 1940. In return, Russians showed the same barbarity when they invaded Germany back in 1944. Nazi propaganda allowed the German Army to be ruthless and barbaric in their assault of Russia on the Eastern Front; in return, the Russian Army showed the same barbarity to the Germans thus resulting in WWII becoming more barbaric.

Propaganda was a tool used by Nazi Germany and other countries during WWII and after to convince the public to believe in an idea. Adolf Hitler used propaganda to rally his country around the idea that they were a master race and that all others were inferior. Hitler told Germany the war against Russia was just because they were ‘ridding Europe of the Jewish-Bolshevism problem’². In 1935 at a Nazi rally at Nuremberg, Josef Goebbels made a speech declaring that ‘Bolshevism is the declaration of war by Jewish-led international subhumans against culture itself’³. Germany political leaders were using their power to influence the nation into believing that their Russian opponents were not humans and that they should not be treated as such. This lack of a humanity was a direct cause of why the second world war was so barbaric. Michael Stout, a WWII historian writes that, ‘On the Eastern Front, images of the savage Red Army led by a corrupt Bolshevik regime were quite believable to any Germans who

² Richard Overy. *The Second World War- A Barbarous Conflict?*

³ Josef Goebbels. *Speech at Nazi Party Congress Rally in Nuremberg. (1935)*

could see what was in front of them'⁴. The German Government was able to use images and descriptions from the Eastern Front to convince citizens that if they lost the war, all would be lost.

Hitler and his commanders initially believed that they would be able to roll into Russia and win the war with ease. However, this was not going to be the case, Russia had more industrial and man power than Germany expected. As a result, Nazi Germany increased propaganda efforts and declared themselves the protector of Europe from the Bolshevik hordes⁵. In return, the German Army became more brutal in their conquests. They burned entire villages and slaughtered civilian hostages because Hitler had told them Jews were no longer in charge of Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution⁶. However, Germany was not the only side that had a hand in this brutality.

Upon invasion from Germany and rapid defeats on the border, Stalin ordered his army to initiate a scorched Earth policy during retreat to prevent Germany from using roads, bridges, crops, and livestock⁷. The Russian Army burned down schools, farms, and public buildings to prevent Germany from using them. During the retreat, Stalin did not evacuate civilians, instead he tore down factories and shipped the supplies and workers deeper into Russia⁸. This disregard for human life was apparent throughout the war but especially on the Eastern Front. Both Germany and Russia cared little for their civilians who could not fight, they were merely obstacles in the path to victory. German soldiers did not care if they were brutal to Russian civilians because once Germany won the war, there would be no thoughts given to the Russian civilians who were

⁴ Stout, Michael J., *The effectiveness of Nazi propaganda during World War II* (2011). p. 10.

⁵ Elwin Humphreys Powell. *The Design of Discord: Studies of Anomie*. (1970) p. 192.

⁶ Geoffrey Megargee. *War of Annihilation: Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front, 1941*. (2007) p. 4

⁷ Indrek Paavle, Peeter Kaasik. *Destruction battalions in Estonia in 1941*. (2006). p. 469–493

⁸ Richard Evans. *In Hitler's Shadow: West German Historians and the Attempt to Escape from the Nazi Past*. (1989) p. 59–60

murdered after Germany's victory. Russia thought the same thing, although their tactics in demonizing German civilians were far more barbaric.

By 1944, Russia was starting to push Germany out of Russia and back in to German lands including Poland. In Poland, Soviet oppression took the place of Nazi oppression. Soviet soldiers often engaged in plunder, rape and other crimes against the Poles, this caused the Poles to fear and hate Russians as much as Germans⁹. Antony Beevor explains the logic behind Russia's actions as a type of 'revenge'. Since Germans were so deadly towards Russian civilians, the Russian Army felt they had the same right to treat the Germany civilians as lesser beings. Soviet soldiers raped those they freed from German control and those they captured¹⁰. It is said that the Russian army raped German women as many times as 15 in one day¹¹. Obviously, Russians went much further in their brutality but they believed their actions were justified after what the Germans did to them. Once again, the ideologies of competing nations caused conflict. Germans believed Russians were a lesser people and treated them as so while Russians soon went on to think the same about Germans. Propaganda and the manipulation of minds caused barbaric acts to occur along the Western Front.

When Germany invaded Russia, Stalin convinced the people that 'the war with Germany was a war of liberation for the working masses of Europe against the threat of fascist imperialism and militarism'¹². It is difficult to disagree here with Stalin, that is exactly what Germany was planning on doing. Giving this as a reason for defending one's nation and practicing scorched Earth policies was justified. However, it was not justified for using it as a reason to rape and

⁹ Grzegorz Baziur, *Armia Czerwona na Pomorzu Gdańskim 1945–1947*. (2002), p. 7

¹⁰ Daniel Johnson. *Red Army troops raped even Russian women as they freed them from camps*. (2012) Telegraph.co.uk.

¹¹ Zaremba Ostrowska. *Kobiece gehenna*. (2009). P.11

¹² Richard Overy. *The Second World War- A Barbarous Conflict?*

plunder German villages that were unprotected. Stalin used the idea that Germany was planning on destroying all of Russia as an excuse to allow his soldiers to commit War Crimes against Germany and other nations. Hitler did the same thing when he sent his soldiers into Russia with the idea that they were fighting against an enemy that were not humans.

A question in regards to the barbarity of World War II is, was it caused by evil leaders or is committing barbarous acts part of human kind? There have been numerous past instances of barbarity in past humans. WWII was the most deadly conflict the world has seen but other wars and conflicts have brought about numerous deaths as well. The Mongol hordes went through Asia raping and plundering what they could find, mass genocides have been committed by different peoples around the world. So what made WWII so barbaric? It was the use of propaganda that convinced people to believe things that were untrue. Entire countries including civilians and soldiers believed what they were told by their government. During other conquests and wars, it was usually only one side committing acts of barbarity while the other suffered from it. However, WWII was different in that both Germany and Russia had the chance to show how brutal their tactics can be and neither of them disappointed. Leaders of both countries were willing to risk everything to win the war.