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DID THE GERMAN GENERALS PLAY US FOR SUCKERS? (BY HELMHOLTZ SMITH) - A Son of the New American Revolution

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5-6 minutes

... much of the Soviet Union's Great Patriotic War remains obscure and imperfectly understood by Westerners and Russians alike. Worse still, this obscurity and misunderstanding has perverted the history of World War II overall by masking the Red Army's and Soviet State's contributions to ultimate Allied victory.

[David Glantz](#)

After the war, we had a lot of German generals in our hands and we got them to tell what happened on the Eastern Front – the war against the USSR – about which we knew very little. This presented the generals with a big dilemma. They wanted to show that, should there be a war against the Soviets, they would have useful things to tell their new owners, but they'd lost and who wants advice from losers? They solved the dilemma with what Jonathon House (see below) has called "the three alibis". They created a story in which they would have beaten the Soviets 1) if only Hitler had let them get on with the job 2) it hadn't been so cold 3) if the Soviets hadn't overwhelmed them

with endless hordes of men.

The first one is quickly disposed of – Hitler did listen to his generals most of the time and it can be argued that when he didn't he was right about half the time.

Cold. Yes, Russia's cold. But Russian feet don't freeze at lower temperatures than German feet. The Russians have foot cloths and felt boots, the Germans have socks (which get holes) and tight leather boots. What would you rather wear when it's 40 below? How about the choice between a Russian ushanka or a German wedge cap tied on with a scarf? Padded jacket or big floppy woolen overcoat? And so on – the Russians dressed for the cold and the Germans didn't. How about lubricants? Something that's nice and slippery in the summer is glue when it's really cold. In short, the Russians were ready to fight in winter and the Germans weren't.

But it's the third alibi that is the least understood. The Soviets did outnumber the Germans but not by that much. What they were really good at was strategic and operational deception. And it doesn't seem that the Germans ever quite realized this. Deception is concealing where you are and what you're going to do and pretending to be where you aren't and going to do something you won't. For the first, rigorous radio silence, camouflage to make the illusion there's nothing there; for the second, dummy equipment, radio chatter, noise making the illusion of a large force ready to attack. Then the real attack, at overwhelming odds, hits the Germans where they're not expecting it. Certainly outnumbered there but not all along the front. It's not clear if the Germans ever figured this out. In short, thanks to the success of deception operations, the Germans thought there were more Soviets than there really were. It takes a lot of planning, a lot of skill and a lot of resources to do

deception on this scale and I don't know of any army that has ever done as much, as often and as well as the Russians. For them it was all the time, every time. As far as I know the Western allies only did deception on this scale with Patton's dummy army group in 1944. (And did the Red Army show them how to do it?)

These are, as House says, alibis indeed. Hitler didn't steal the victory from his generals, they didn't plan for the cold and the Russians fooled them over and over again about numbers.

And what were these alibis designed to explain away? To explain away the fact that the Russians were just *better at war* than the Germans were, good as they undeniably were. Strategically and operationally, after the initial surprise, the Soviets beat them every time. And that's the truth the German generals were hiding.

How much of this wrong interpretation is still out there and informing the comments you see about Russia's performance in the war in Ukraine?

Quite a bit I think. All that stuff about poor planning, incompetence, failing logistics, bad morale has its roots in the Three Alibis. Strategic and operational excellence, deception, not so much.

NOTE *For those who want to explore the subject further, [Dr House's lecture on the Three Alibis](#) [is worth the hour](#). Some time in the 1970s or 1980s the US Army set up a Soviet studies section under [Colonel David Glantz](#). The group did outstanding work on the war in the east and Glantz (often together with House) has published many [books](#) on how and what the Soviets did. [This essay](#) is a good starting point for his overview.*

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