

Bakhmut=Verdun=Stalingrad

by [Armando Simón](#) (June 2023)



Stalingrad, Kees Van Bohemen, 1962

What we learn from history is that no one learns from history.—Bismarck

Stupidity is evident throughout history, found at times, counterintuitively, at the highest level of society in practically every field: politics, academia, fashion, military, economy, art. The consequences of stupidly adhering to a wrong idea have at times been disastrous and even deadly

to the everyday citizen; we see this in the Russian attack on Ukraine. Unfortunately, the formal study of stupidity in history is unpopular to professional historians who like to think of historical protagonists as chess players writ large.

At the present time we see an example of stupidity at the highest levels in the Russo-Ukrainian War, at the Battle of Bakhmut which has been going on for months. By now, the city has been thoroughly devastated, so its capture is basically pointless as far as capturing it would result in an advantage, strategically, politically or economically, certainly not more so than any other city in that or nearby province (oblast). "The Russians have had a Bakhmut fixation," said Australian General Mick [Ryan](#). Nonetheless, both sides have become obsessed with taking it/defending it, resulting in its devastation and tens of thousands of casualties (numbers are not exact at this point, both sides being silent).

Both sides deem it important. As Luigi Pirandello stated, *Così è se vi pare*.

To be bogged down in a specific area for so long, suffering attrition of men and materiel is anachronistic in this day and age. B. Liddell [Hart](#) long ago pointed out that mobility and indirect assaults render victory, something that the Germans amply demonstrated in WWII with their blitzkrieg, wherein their forces bypassed strong points to strike at the rear of the enemy. To be sure, if given proper time to prepare defenses, the defending side will usually inflict around three times more casualties than it will itself suffer, but after a certain point the attrition becomes prohibitive to both sides.

The past century offers two examples where a battle of attrition lasting months resulted in horrendous casualties for both sides, Verdun and Stalingrad. That one side finally emerged victorious does not erase the fact that the battles were, one might say criminally, carried out.

Of course, there are writers that insist that both battles were necessary or heroic, even rational in their objectives. *Così è se vi pare.*

The Battle of Verdun came to being as the brainchild of von Falkenhayn halfway into WW I. Without using mass attacks, the plan called for the army attacking Verdun, a complex of undermanned forts, in order to force the French to commit all their reserves. Having then seized secure positions, they would annihilate French forces with a barrage of artillery. As with Bakhmut, there was only one supply line to Verdun from the French side. Verdun had a historical importance to the defenders. The German plan became known to the French, but Joffe ignored it. The attack began in mid-February with some successes; 10 days after the beginning, the French finally realized the seriousness, but the weather then seriously hampered the continuing German attacks. French artillery resulted in heavy casualties for the attackers, at which point von Falkenhayn wanted to end the assault but was overruled, tactics changed, and the carnage continued. Attacks and counterattacks and counter-counterattacks continued, both sides obsessed with winning the battle resulting in a mounting slaughter on both sides, the battle lasting 302 days with almost a million casualties.

The [Battle](#) of Stalingrad is more familiar because of its temporal proximity and because we have been force fed anti-nazi films for sixty-odd years. The city of Stalingrad was one of numerous, unrealistic, objectives laid down by the Nazi dictator. By July, it had become obvious to the Soviets that capturing the city and destroying its industrial capacity was one of his goals, even after the Germans had cut the oil supply pipelines from the Caucasus. The name of the city alone was incentive to defend/capture it. The Soviets sent in reinforcements and none of the 400,000 civilians were allowed to evacuate (only 50,000 ultimately survived). The battle took months, and the city became rubble; halfway through the

battle, it was obvious that the city had been rendered worthless to either side.

In November, the Soviets attacked at the north and south of the Axis corridor outside the city, guarded by poorly supplied Hungarians, Italians, and Romanians, since the concentration of Germans were in the city-rubble. The city was cut off from supplies as winter fell with a vengeance and ultimately, the exhausted, starving Germans surrendered. Overall, there were over two million casualties.

We truly never learn from history.

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