

Additional Materials for The Battle of Russia

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Overview:

The Battle of Russia was the fifth film of Frank Capra's Why We Fight propaganda film series. It is the longest film of the series, beginning with an overview of previous failed attempts to conquer Russia: by the Teutonic Knights in 1212 (footage from Sergei Eisenstein's film Alexander Nevsky is used here), by Charles XII of Sweden in 1704, by Napoleon I in 1812 and by Imperial Germany in World War I.

The vast natural resources of the Soviet Union are then described, showing why the land is such a hot prize for conquerors. To give a positive impression of the Soviet Union to the American audience, the country's ethnic diversity is covered in detail. Later on, elements of Russian culture familiar to Americans, including the musical compositions of Tchaikovsky and Leo Tolstoy's book *War and Peace* are also mentioned. Communism is never mentioned at any point in the film.

The film then covers the Nazi conquests in the Balkans, described as a preliminary to close off possible Allied counter-invasion routes, before the war against Russia was launched on June 22, 1941. The narration describes the German "keil und kessel" tactics for offensive warfare, and the Soviet "defense in depth" used to counter this. The scorched earth Soviet tactics, the room-to-room urban warfare in Soviet cities, and the guerilla warfare behind enemy lines are also used to underline the Soviet resolve for victory against the Nazis.

One powerful scene shows Russians swearing their oath:

For the burned cities and villages

For the deaths of our children and our mothers

For the torture and humiliation of our people

I swear revenge upon the enemy

I swear that I would rather die in battle with the enemy

Than surrender myself my people and my country to the Fascist invaders

Blood for Blood!

Death for Death!

The Siege of Leningrad and the Battle of Stalingrad conclude the film.

Background:

- Sept. 1940 Selective Service Act, but new draftees "haven't the slightest enthusiasm for this war or this cause. They are not grouchy, they are not mutinous, they just don't give a tinker's dam." (Kansas newspaper editor William Allen White to White House adviser Lowell Mellett)
- new Army Morale Branch failed to improve morale due to the "deadly effects of prepared lectures indifferently read to bored troops." (George Marshall)
- Harold Ickes, Frank Knox, Henry Stimson wanted to create a national propaganda agency, but FDR opposed until after Pearl Harbor

- FDR on Dec. 18, 1941, appointed Lowell Mellett as Coordinator of Government Films to officially mobilize Hollywood for war
- Office of War Information created in June 1942, but slow to do anything about soldier education; Mellett's film office became the Bureau of Motion Pictures, but its *World at War* in 1942, the "first officially sponsored feature length motion picture" of the government, was a failure; OWI review power over studio productions (Robert Riskin worked for overseas OWI branch in 1943 and was told to ban *Meet John Doe*, the film he wrote for Capra in 1941, as "unsuitable for foreign screens at this time." (Doherty p. 51)
- Major Frank Capra assigned to the Morale Branch in Feb. 1942; ordered by Marshall to "make a series of documented, factual-information films - the first in our history - that will explain to our boys in the Army why we are fighting, and the principles for which we are fighting." (Marshall quoted by Capra)
- Capra saw Leni Riefenstahl's [Triumph of the Will](#), a film that "fired no gun, dropped no bombs. But as a psychological weapon aimed at destroying the will to resist, it was just as lethal." (Capra) He used clips from this film and other Nazi films
- Released Oct. 30, 1942, shown to war plants in April, 1943, to the general public May 27, 1943.
- By 1943, War Dept. had developed a large and significant program to bring movies to all soldiers on every battlefield; next to guns, what "the boys need most is movies and more movies" (Ike) and 2400 picture shows were shown each night in European/Mediterranean theaters by 1945; films were designed to be "educational, inspirational, recreational" (Will Hays)
- Popular films included the bi-weekly action-oriented *Army-Navy Screen Magazine*, with its Private Snafu dog mascot from Tex Avery at Warner Bros., the 3-minute sing-songs, cartoons such as Disney's *Der Fuehrer's Face*, the 10-minute Victory films like Jimmy Stewart's AAF recruit short *Winning Your Wings*, Historical Information films such as William Wyler's *The Memphis Belle* in April 1944, and Hollywood feature films such as the 1942 *Flying Tigers*.

Themes:

- Free world vs. Slave world
- Freedom vs. Power
- Weakness vs. Strength
- A single totalitarian world-wide conspiracy

Sources:

- Capra, Frank. *The Name Above The Title* New York, 1971.
- Doherty, Thomas. *Projections Of War. Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.
- Hanlon, Mary. [Capra, Smith, & Doe](#) M.A. thesis, American Studies, University of Virginia, August 1997.

Scene Notes:

Why We Fight - Battle of Russia
 Battle of Russia - Part I

- "History knows no greater display of courage than that shown by the people of Soviet Russia." - Henry Stimson
- "This is a film about a people who shattered the legend of German invincibility"
- 1242 - German knights invaded Russia and threatened capital Novgorod
- 1704 - Charles I of Sweden invaded Russia
- 1812 - Napoleon invaded Russia
- 1914 - Kaiser Wilhelm invaded Russia
- map - Ukraine and Crimea
- "Why have all these attempts been made to conquer Russia?"
- map - 1/6 of the earth's surface - 9 million square miles - the sun never sets
- rich in raw materials, 1/4 world's lumber, coal, 55% world's oil, iron, farms, 1/3 world's wheat
- "Russia is also people" -193 million people "of every race, color, creed" speaking 100 languages, including famous Cossack horsemen, the Ukrainians from southwest breadbasket, and Modavians and Bessarabians, and the Armenians and Georgians of the Caucasus, Uzbeks from Kazak frontier, or Mongols and Tartars, the Laplanders of far north
- modern capital of Moscow, "housewives or postal clerks, musicians or ballerinas, " - "all have one thing in common, love of their soil"
- map - " That is Russia." - Three reasons why every conquerer has tried: size, raw materials, manpower
- now, new threat of conquest by Nazi Germany
- 1934 - Russia joined League of Nations
- map - Manchuria, Ethiopia, Poland
- map-Germans turned west
- map - preliminary steps - Hungary had rich fields of grain, bauxite for planes, army - Rumania had oil, men, slave labor and canon fodder
- map - both had Russian frontiers - Bulgaria did have bases on Med. Sea
- Admiral Horthy of Hungary, young King Michael of Rumania and Hitler's puppet Gen. Antonescu, and King Boris of Bulgaria allowed German occupation
- March 1941 - German armies occupied 3 countries
- map - left Greece and Yugoslavia, but "Hitler's stooge" Mussolini failed to conquer
- map - Greeks drove Italians back after Mussolini's troops tried to cross Albania border, and Greeks invaded Albania

CHAPTER 1 - Air Attack

- April 6 - at dawn Germany bombed Yugoslavia
- map - Germans and Italians launched coordinated attack from all sides of Yugoslavia
- map - "war on Greece also began on April 6"
- by end of April, swastika flew over Athens - "The conquest of the Balkans was now complete"
- Russian industry converted to war goods, army grew and trained for the "titanic struggle"
- map - "Russians had built a buffer" to protect themselves
- German attack began on broad front with 2 million men toward Leningrad in north, Moscow in center by von Bock and captured Smolensk July 17, Ukraine in south
- "then a strange thing happened" - "came up against a country that did not submit"
- map - 500,000 square miles had fallen to the invaders

- "Let's try to analyze it" - two strategies came face to face
- German wedge and trap strategy
- map - German strategies in Poland, France, Balkans used blitzkrieg to break through
- Russian defense-in-depth strategy
- map - deeper the Germans advanced, the stronger the foe
- Russians kept main army intact, used cities as strongholds, "the more a city was bombed, the more it became impassable to the Germany army"
- "Odessa" was the scene of heroic siege of two months - "Sevastopol" an 8-month defense inch-by inch, "each street, street-by-street, each house, house-by-house, each room, room-by-room"
- "June 22, 1941" - Russian people grim and determined - total war
- "scorched earth" as Russians "surrendered to the flames but not to the invaders"
- "this is the guerilla army, this is the scorched earth, this is the Red army"
- map - these are the reasons why Germans stopped at Moscow
- fresh reserves of the Red army marched in the streets of Moscow singing
- end title - part 2 next
- V for victory

CHAPTER 2 - Battle of Russia

- starts part II - one minute review of part 1
- "Fighter Command ready, Bomber Command ready, parachutists ready, infantry ready"
- "Now it was the Germans turn to fight for their lives. Now for the first time it was the German army that retreated."
- montage of Russian people scenes
- Germans destroyed home of Tchaikowsky "the piano concerto, the 5th Symphony, the 6th Symphony" that had been an inspiration for the Russian people - home of Tolstoy - Russian dead frozen in snow - "these are the children" who were victims of Nazi mass murder - hangings
- "Blood for Blood, Death for Death"
- map - Germans were pushed back from Moscow and the Russians "shattered whole legend of Nazi invincibility"
- Another factor shattered the legend - northern city of Leningrad today, called Petrograd before
- montage of air raid sirens, German bombers, anti-aircraft guns
- "Finally the morning comes and the people of Leningrad dig themselves out from the ruins. They seem very similar here to the people of London, Rotterdam, Warsaw"
- map - Nazis surround city and began 17-month siege of Leningrad
- cold, hard winter became an ally - 30 degrees below zero
- workers got 8 oz bread per day, others got half that - women workers cleared rubble
- "Germans decided to shell them into surrender"
- map - Leningrad between Lake Ladoga and Baltic - 100 miles of ice connected the besieged city with far shore - new lake highway opened on ice for trucks

CHAPTER 3 - Troops by Train

- Railroad track laid across frozen lake, and Red Army launched counterattacks, "driving them inch-by-inch back from the city's outskirts"

- "and then spring came" and the ice began to melt - "for the first time in months the trollies ran" - "this was life again, life for the Leningrad children, life for the Russian WACs and WAVs" and for the Russian sailors who went to the ballet
- "people win wars"
- "summer 1942" - new posters greet help from Allies, supplies arriving in ports
- German strength concentrated on Caucasus
- map - Baku on the Caspian, Germans needed to control northern railroads and hub of Stalingrad on the Volga
- map - Germans could control flow of supplies
- The Volga is "the vital artery "

CHAPTER 4 - Long March

- map - German attack on Kerch peninsula, Sevastopol, controlled Crimea, next German attack was to the Don River and to northern Caucasus
- 2 barriers - mountains and determination of people of Caucasus
- German orders - "Stalingrad must be captured"
- Germans began to enter city but "would meet a fiery fury of which they had never known"
- "every inch of the city was a strategic point and defended as such"
- Russian sniper kills running German
- "Battle of the Streets" continued - as November dawned, the Russians "inch-by-inch were regaining" their city
- tickertape brought news - British and Americans in North Africa
- [end of film cut off in middle of map]