

THE ROOTS OF SOVIET VICTORY: THE APPLICATION OF
OPERATIONAL ART ON THE EASTERN FRONT,
1942-1943

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MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE
Military History

by

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This thesis considers the extent to which Soviet ascendancy over Germany by late 1943 can be attributed to a resurgence of operational art. Discussion begins with an overview of operational art and the development of the theory up to 1937. It explains the significant differences between Soviet and western terminology and discusses the writings of key Russian and Soviet theorists, as well as the opinions of contemporary historians. The thesis proceeds to examine two campaigns. First, the Soviet Winter 1942-43 offensives and German counteroffensives. This period saw the surrender of the German 6th Army at Stalingrad but ended in operational defeat for the Red Army. Turning to the campaigns of summer 1943 that began with Operation CITADEL, the thesis examines the struggle better known as the Battle of Kursk. This study includes the Soviet 1943 summer offensives and concludes in October 1943, by which time the Germans had suffered a significant operational and strategic defeat. The thesis analyses the extent to which the reemergence of operational art was responsible for the reversal in Soviet fortunes. It also discusses other factors that contributed to Soviet success and to German failures.

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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the student author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College or any other governmental agency. (References to this study should include the foregoing statement.)

ABSTRACT

THE ROOTS OF SOVIET VICTORY: THE APPLICATION OF OPERATIONAL ART ON THE EASTERN FRONT, 1942-1943, by Major James R Howard, 1 pages.

This thesis considers the extent to which Soviet ascendancy over Germany by late 1943 can be attributed to a resurgence of operational art.

Discussion begins with an overview of operational art and the development of the theory up to 1937. It explains the significant differences between Soviet and western terminology and discusses the writings of key Russian and Soviet theorists, as well as the opinions of contemporary historians.

The thesis proceeds to examine two campaigns. First, the Soviet Winter 1942-43 offensives and German counteroffensives. This period saw the surrender of the German 6th Army at Stalingrad but ended in operational defeat for the Red Army. Turning to the campaigns of summer 1943 that began with Operation CITADEL, the thesis examines the struggle better known as the Battle of Kursk. This study includes the Soviet 1943 summer offensives and concludes in October 1943, by which time the Germans had suffered a significant operational and strategic defeat.

The thesis analyses the extent to which the reemergence of operational art was responsible for the reversal in Soviet fortunes. It also discusses other factors that contributed to Soviet success and to German failures.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

For every possible reason the main task of our operational art lay in creating new forms and techniques of operation aimed at destroying the enemy, under new historical conditions, with a new Army, and with a new material and technological base.¹

G. K. Isserson

This thesis will examine the theoretical development of operational art in the interwar period. It will focus on the fundamental principles that emerged as the trade marks of Soviet operational art and will discuss the opinions of formative theorists who were responsible for their development. The purpose of the research is to identify the extent to which Soviet successes in World War II can be attributed to correct employment of operational art. In order to answer this question, this paper will focus on two campaigns. First, the Soviet winter 1942 and 1943 offensives that resulted in the surrender of the German 6th Army at Stalingrad but which ended in near operational disaster for the Red Army. The second campaign examined began with Operation CITADEL and is better known as the Battle of Kursk.

These campaigns have been chosen as, on the surface, they appear similar in many ways. The senior commanders remain generally unchanged. The correlation in the size of opposing forces remains largely constant. The ground over which the battles were fought is, in many cases, the same. However, Soviet operational failure in the first was followed by strategic and operational victory in the second; a victory that marked the beginning of the end for German forces in the east.

The specific question to which this paper provides an answer is: what accounts for the change in Soviet fortunes over this relatively short period? Can Soviet success be attributed to a rebirth of operational art alone, or were other factors responsible?

This chapter will introduce the reader to Soviet operational art. It will also provide a definitive terminological framework within which the key attributes and tenets of operational art can be discussed. It will focus on the fundamental principles that emerged as trade marks of operational art, and will outline the formulation of these concepts.

Chapter 2 will examine respected primary and secondary sources upon which this paper draws for analysis and historical reference. Chapter 2 serves two purposes. First, it analyzes the literature on the subject, drawing upon the work of Soviet theorists, many of whom were senior military leaders. It will evaluate and summarize the discussion that took place in the 1920s and 1930s between the many camps, and how the free flow of ideas came to represent operational art as we understand it today. Using current secondary sources, chapter 2 will outline the contemporary discussions, thus bringing the analysis up to date.

Chapter 2 will also summarize key works that best describe the history of the period under examination. Using primary and secondary sources, it will identify the role of operational art in the planning and execution phases of the two campaigns.

Chapters 3 and 4 will discuss the two campaigns. The format will be the same in both cases: a summary of historical events will be followed by an analysis of what led to the end state in each case. Chapter 3 will explain why the Red Army was unable to capitalize upon its initial success at Stalingrad. Chapter 4 will expand on the causes of the crushing Soviet victory at Kursk that ended with the German army on the west bank of

the Dnepr River, thus signaling the beginning the Red Army's tortuous journey to Berlin. Yet the discussion must first begin with the development of a framework around which to build an argument.

To appreciate fully the development of Soviet operational art in the inter war period, it is necessary to understand the conditions that set Russia apart from countries such as Great Britain, France, Germany, and the United States, and which led her military theorists and strategists to pursue new ways to fight future wars. Several areas warrant expansion in order to set the scene. First, the geography of the Soviet Union sets her apart from her European counterparts, a factor which has a considerable impact and overriding influence on the way that she views the conduct of war. Her position on the edge of the vast European plain, with few natural obstacles to hinder an invading force, differs markedly from Great Britain or the United States, whose ability to project power through their navy was of primary importance at the time.

Second, partly because of her geographic situation, the experiences of the Russian military were significantly different to those of her European counterparts. Russia did not experience the trench warfare and stalemate experienced by the Allies on the Western Front. Instead, the ground over which the Russian army fought in World War I was conducive to maneuver and mobile warfare. The search for victory under those conditions remained elusive in that war. When combined with the experiences of the Red Army in the Russian Civil War, where engagements were conducted over frontages and depth measured in hundreds of kilometers, it is clear that Russian military theorists faced different challenges to their western counterparts. Military thought in the west addressed how best to avoid the attrition and unacceptable casualties experienced in the trench

warfare and stalemate of the Western Front in the Great War. Russian theorists addressed the need to coordinate and synchronize military engagements over a vast area using large forces in order to achieve victory.

A final consideration worthy of note is the state of Russian industrial development in the early years of the twentieth century. The ability of Russian industry to produce modern weaponry lagged far behind that of the west. Russian forces lacked artillery in sufficient numbers and were slow to capitalize on the benefits of mechanization. Military theorists therefore faced the challenge of modernizing the tools of the army as well as the way in which they were to be employed.

By the end of the Civil War, Russian strategists had learnt the hard way that their forces must be able to meet minimum standards: field a well-trained force, equipped with sufficient quantities of modern weaponry, that was well led at every level and which could bring about a decision where necessary. The Russo-Japanese war, World War I, and the Civil War served further to highlight these shortcomings.

Soviet terminology and understanding of military theory differs significantly from that of western militaries. Many western armies, amongst them those of Britain and the United States, have tended to view doctrine with ambivalence if not something approaching disdain, choosing instead to focus on the overriding importance of military capability. This is at odds with the Soviet view, where there exists a clearly defined military doctrine and hierarchy of terms, ranging from the operations conducted at the strategic level, down to battlefield tactics. This framework provides a stable and enduring foundation for discussion of military procedures, which western forces lack even today. In order to examine operational art, it is therefore necessary to define the more commonly

encountered doctrinal terms used by Russian and Soviet theorists during the period under examination.

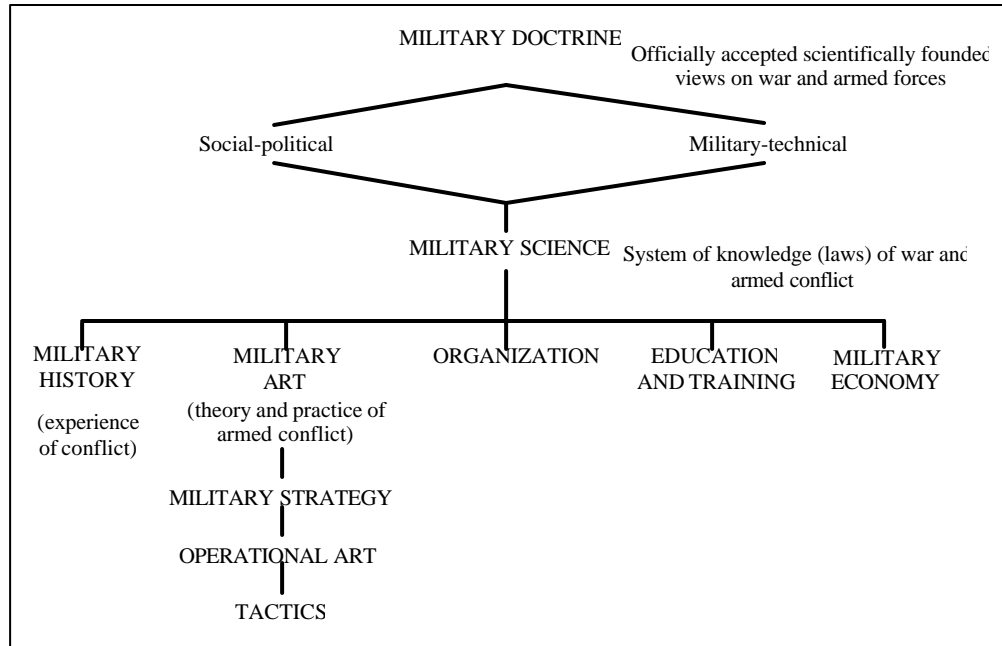


Figure 1. The Hierarchy of Terms. *Source:* David M. Glantz, *Soviet Military Operational Art: In Pursuit of Deep Battle*. (London: Frank Cass and Co Ltd, 1991), 3.

Military Doctrine: In order to understand Soviet *doctrine*, one must first take account of the complications that arise from a translation of Russian into English. Soviet “*doktrina*” is inextricably linked to the strategic level of war. As such, it is concerned with policy and decision making at the grand strategic, or national level. For that reason, it is unsurprising that there are few books that discuss Soviet *doktrina*. Given the lack of a Russian word that bears an acceptable correlation to the western meaning of *doctrine*, Dr. Orenstein uses the phrase *tactics and operational art* when translating *doctrine* into

Russian. In order to maintain continuity and establish a foundation throughout this paper upon which to build, *doctrine* will be defined as: “a nation’s officially accepted system of scientifically founded views on the nature of modern wars and the use of the armed force in them, and also on the requirements arising from these views regarding the country and its armed forces being made ready for war.”² It is acknowledged that such a definition is based on an inaccurate translation of terms; however, the need to establish a clear and common framework for discussion and analysis is deemed to be of greater importance than linguistic accuracy. Doctrine seeks to provide solutions to the challenges faced by a country at war, by addressing before hand questions such as:

1. What is the nature of the enemy the state will face in a possible war?
2. What is the nature of the war in which the state will fight; what goals and missions might they be required to meet?
3. How are preparations for war to be implemented?
4. What methods must be used to wage war?³

In the case of the Soviet Union, doctrine incorporates the scientifically founded views of military science with the views of the Communist party, which in turn reflect Marxist-Leninist teaching on the nature of war.

Military Science: “A system of knowledge concerning the nature and laws of war; the preparation of the armed forces and nation for war, and the means of conducting war.”⁴ Therefore, as historian David Glantz notes, military science encompasses not only the preparation for, and conduct of the war, but also peacetime activities such as: military education and training; development of a military economy; and the study of military history. A. A Grechko states that, “ military science investigates the laws of war, which

reflect the dependence of the course and outcome of war on the politics, economics and the correlation of morale-political, scientific-technical, and military capabilities of the warring sides, was well as the main processes of preparing and conducting war.’⁵

Svechin reinforced the primacy of the political over the military: “War is waged not only on an armed front; it is also waged on the class and economic fronts. Operations on all fronts must be coordinated by politics.’⁶

Military Art: Military art provides “the theory and practice of preparing and conducting military operations on the land, at sea, and in the air.’⁷ As that part of Soviet military theory from which strategy, operational art and tactics stem, some amplification on the role of military art is beneficial:

The theory of military art, as the most important element of Soviet military science, studies and elaborates actual methods and forms of armed combat. It represents a complex mix of direct military discipline, which, like all the remaining branches of military science, is constantly changing and being creatively enriched. The theory of military art consists of strategy, operational art, and tactics, each of which represents a whole field of scientific knowledge. Strategy, operational art, and tactics are interrelated, interdependent and supplement each other. Among these, strategy plays the predominant role.⁸

Military Strategy: Strategy is regarded as the highest form of the military art. Strategy, based on military doctrine, deals with the theory and practice of preparing the armed forces for war and of planning and fighting the war. It is reliant upon a states’ economic ability.⁹ Svechin’s discussion of strategy is most apposite given the contemporary nature of the publication in relation to the campaign that will be examined.

The success of an individual operation is not the ultimate goal pursued in conducting military operations. . . . The Germans won many operations in the World War but lost the last one, and with it the entire war. Ludendorf . . . was unable to combine a series of operational successes to gain even the slightest advantages when Germany concluded peace. . . . Strategy is the art of combining preparations for war and the grouping of operations for achieving the goal set by

the war for the armed forces. Strategy decides issues associated with the employment of the armed forces and all the resources of a country for achieving ultimate war aims. . . . A strategist will be successful if he correctly evaluates the nature of a war, which depends on different economic, social, geographic, administrative and technical factors.¹⁰

Operational Art: Second in the hierarchy of military art, operational art is the link between strategy and tactics. Svechin famously described the position of operational art within the hierarchy in the following way:

Strategy decides questions concerning both the use of the armed forces and all the resources of the state for the achievement of ultimate military aims. . . . The material of operational art is tactics and logistics. Operational art, arising from the aim of the operation, generates a series of tactical missions and establishes a series of tasks for the activity of rear area organs. Tactics makes the steps from which operational leaps are assembled. Strategy points out the path.¹¹

Tactics: Tactics, occupying the lower level of military art, bears similarities with the term understood by officers of NATO armies today, although there are some subtle, but fundamental differences. In the west, tactics governs the employment of the armed forces on the battlefield in the presence of the enemy. Strategy is understood to be that part of the science that deals with the movements of armies from one theatre to another in preparation for war, or in order to engage a separate enemy force. According to the Soviet definition, tactics is used to describe those actions taken within the army which, when combined, contribute to the attainment of operational goals. However, it must be remembered that an army's tactical capabilities determine the operational goals that are set within the strategic concept. Tactics tend to determine the goals, scale and methods of operation.

Tactics is more closely related to battle requirements than the other components of military art. . . . On the basis of the reality of the modern battlefield, tactics orchestrate specific technical operations into an integrated kind of battle, and tactics try to rationalize all military equipment, establish criteria for organizing, arming and indoctrinating troops, for troop movements and for rest,

reconnaissance and security in accordance with combat requirements. Tactical theory is nothing more than technical topics (meaning troop movements techniques and so forth) which are examined together rather than separately from the perspective of the modern battle conditions they engender as a whole.¹²

This chapter has introduced the operational level of war and has defined the terminology of operational art. Chapter 2 will focus specifically on the operational level, and the development of operational art in particular.

¹Richard W. Harrison, *The Russian Way of War: Operational Art, 1904-1940* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 138.

²David M. Glantz, *Soviet Military Operational Art: In Pursuit of Deep Battle* (London: Frank Cass and Co., Ltd, 1991), 2.

³Harriet Fast Scott and William F. Scott, eds. *The Soviet Art of War: Doctrine, Strategy, and Tactics* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1982), 4.

⁴David M. Glantz, *Soviet Military Operational Art: In Pursuit of Deep Battle* (London: Frank Cass and Co., Ltd, 1991), 5.

⁵*Ibid.*, 5.

⁶Aleksandr A. Svechin, *Strategiia* (Moscow, Voennyi vestnik, first published in Moscow in 1926. East View Publications, Mpls, MN, 1999), 84.

⁷Ivanov and Evseev quoted in David M. Glantz, *Soviet Military Operational Art: In Pursuit of Deep Battle* (London: Frank Cass and Co., Ltd, 1991), 6.

⁸Kozlov, quoted in Harriet Fast and William F. Scott, eds. *The Soviet Art of War: Doctrine, Strategy, and Tactics* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1982). 7.

⁹Grechko, quoted in Harriet Fast and William F. Scott, eds. *The Soviet Art of War: Doctrine, Strategy, and Tactics* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1982). 7.

¹⁰Aleksandr A. Svechin, *Strategiia* (Moscow: Voennyi vestnik, first published in Moscow in 1926. East View Publications, Mpls, MN, 1999), 69.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 17.

¹²*Ibid.*, 68.

CHAPTER 2

THE DEVELOPMENT OF OPERATIONAL ART

A considerable amount has been written on operational art. The majority of writings published before the outbreak of World War II tend to take the form of a discussion, which is not surprising since these were the formative years of the theory. One might suppose that after 1945, the nature of the literature would change, and it is at this point that there seems to be a divergence in the nature of that which is available. Whereas, in the immediate aftermath of Germany's defeat, one might expect there to be a flood of publications about the effectiveness and future direction of operational art, there is a dearth of literature from the Soviet Union on this subject. Quite simply, the Soviet's have a very different view of what we in the west would term "doctrine" and view it as a national secret.¹ Soviet doctrine remained highly classified, and discussion on its past effectiveness and future direction took place behind closed doors. Similarly, while texts on the eastern front in World War II written by western authors are innumerable, Soviet historical texts, albeit with a few notable exceptions, are more difficult to obtain. This chapter will provide, in two parts, a review of publications upon which this study has drawn. Part I will discuss the literature on operational art. Part II will consider texts that analyze Russo-German operations on the eastern front between late-1941 and December 1943.

Part I--The Theory of Operational Art

Many western texts from the early twentieth century are available. Some authors, writing before the advent of World War II, subsumed the lessons of the War into new editions. Of these publications, few have been enduring. Exceptions are the works of Liddell-Hart, J. F. C. Fuller and Richard Simpkin, whose writings are studied even today.

The policy of Glasnost and the end of the Cold War did not necessarily lead to a review of Red Army records nor did it result in the release of sufficient material to generate a revisionist debate. Old habits die hard. Perhaps because of the perceived need to preserve the reputations of certain marshals and Heroes of the Soviet Union, the archives remain generally closed. David Glantz has hinted that the availability of certain material is improving, but it will not reach the public domain for many years.

Before examining works that discuss the theory of operational art, it is useful to summarize the development of operational thought. Many men played an important role in the development of Soviet operational art, but perhaps foremost amongst them are key figures such as Leer, Svechin, Tukhachevsky, and Triandafillov. These men, amongst others it must be noted, sought to develop and refine a doctrine that would enable their army to fight and win future wars. Their works were based on lessons from numerous campaigns and battles, including the Napoleonic Wars, the Franco-Prussian War, the Russo-Japanese War, World War I, the Russian Civil War, and the Russo-Polish War. It was through a study of history, engagements, battles, and logistics that Soviet operational art was advanced.

It is perhaps not widely understood that war has always been central to Russian history.² It is unsurprising, therefore, that the desire to improve warfighting doctrine was a recurrent theme in Russo-Soviet military academia. Soviet theorists broadly agreed that future war would be long and would involve large armies. By the late 1920s it was accepted that the army needed to modernize. Tukhachevsky, who in 1928 was commander of the Leningrad Military District, was able to experiment with new ideas. His conclusions identified him as a proponent for modernization and mechanization; “revolutionary spirit, without the necessary equipment, cannot triumph in a future war.”³

By 1932 the Red Army was at the forefront of efforts to develop the link between tactics and strategy: operational doctrine. Mechanization of the force began to give the Red Army the means to conduct battles in accordance with the key tenets developed under the broad title of operational art. This combination of ways and means looked set to produce significant results. On consecutive operations, Varfolomeev wrote that victory is achieved through,

An entire series of linked operations, consecutively developing one after the other, logically linked between themselves, united by the commonality of the final goal, and each achieving limited, intermediate goals . . . the operation’s goals--the destruction and complete rout of the enemy’s armed force; the method--an uninterrupted offensive; the means--a prolonged operational pursuit, avoiding pauses and halts and realized by a series of consecutive operations, of which each is an intermediate link on the road to the final goal, achieved in the final, decisive operation.⁴

The pioneering Triandafillov is rightly credited with developing the theory of deep operations. Technological advances incorporating increased weapon ranges, mobility, and destructive power now enabled the Red Army to:

Strike the enemy simultaneously throughout the entire depth of his position, as opposed to current forms of battle and attack, which may be characterized as the

consecutive suppression of successive parts of the battle order. The means are used so as to paralyze the fire of all defensive weapons, regardless of the depth of their deployment, to isolate one enemy unit from another, to disrupt cooperation between them, and to destroy them in detail.⁵

Before his accidental death in 1931, Triandafillov addressed aspects of warfighting that were, in time, to become central tenets of Soviet military theory. He understood that overcoming a deliberate defense remained a challenge to which few armies had found a practical solution. Realizing that the defender was able to withstand a series of offensive shocks, he proposed as a solution the “shock army,” which would break through the enemy’s tactical defense and then continue the offensive into the operational depth and beyond. He envisaged that this combined arms force, containing twelve to eighteen rifle divisions in up to five corps, would be reinforced for the operation by up to twenty artillery regiments and twelve tank battalions, and would utilize the effects of brigades of heavy and light bombers to strike the enemy depth, while fighter cover supported the ground attack.⁶ Refuting the World War I practice of attacking along a narrow front, thereby enabling the enemy to maneuver uncommitted forces to provide a defense in depth, Triandafillov envisaged launching broad, rippling offensives. G. S. Isserson, a young disciple, put it succinctly: “it is necessary to keep the enemy’s reserves in place along the entire front, so as to prevent the defender from concentrating his unengaged forces against the breakthrough area.”⁷

Triandafillov’s discussion of deep operations was also influential. In this respect, his discussion of “shock armies” provided the STAVKA with a framework around which to build forces tasked with deep operations, against a defense that was more fluid than perhaps the static defense Triandafillov had foreseen.

Shimon Naveh's book *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory* provides a root and branch review of operational theory and has the benefit of being a modern text. Naveh attempts to improve understanding of the operational level of war and, by analyzing the German and Soviet approach to operational art, seeks to address the following issues:

1. In what distinct aspects does it differ from the strategic and tactical levels?
2. What are the criteria by which an operational problem is to be identified?
3. How should one differentiate between the practical aspects of operational art and the cognitive aspects deriving from the operational level?⁸

Naveh's discussion on the theory of operational shock and the elements that comprise operational maneuver theory provides insight into the theory of army level operations, and deep and simultaneous operations in particular. By initiating superior concentrations of troops, fire and resources structured in column configuration and aimed at a certain point along the continuous defensive front, Naveh notes that it may be possible to produce a series of successive tactical shocks along the vertical axis of penetration, creating an operational cleavage, and overcoming the resistance of the defenders' holding force.⁹ Consequently, Soviet theorists integrated the actions of the break in, breakthrough, breakout and advance into operational depth into a unified, coherent operational process, which in turn created the conditions that allowed a tactical success to be developed into an operational opportunity.

Deep column strikes were designed to produce separation among the defenders tactical and operational formations. When such actions were achieved, Naveh believes

that the separation of the rival system would accelerate, bringing about its collapse. Here then, Naveh provides us with a framework within which to consider the operations of fronts and armies. However, as later chapters demonstrate, the existence of a theory does not necessarily enable successful execution in practice. Indeed, the methodology that Naveh outlines above is either ignored by Soviet planners or fails to achieve results until mid 1943.

Dr. Bruce Menning, writing in *Military Review*, looks to blitzkrieg in his study of operational art. Like Naveh, he offers a disapproving view of lightning war, while noting that it had shown promise in the 1920s.¹⁰ Under von Schlichting, the Germans had also attempted to better understand the link between tactics and strategy under the heading of “operativ.” However, they did not apply themselves strenuously to the issue nor did they elaborate upon it with any degree of persistence. Menning notes that as time progressed, “under the influence of varied perspectives and preoccupations, other commentators saw no gap [between tactics and strategy] and therefore found little reason to worry about it, continuing to regard tactics and strategy as directly linked.”¹¹ Given the lack of a strong pre-World War I foundation in operational art, it is presumably for this reason that the Germans in the 1920s focused largely on the tactical lessons from the war, rather than pursuing operational art. Notwithstanding the enormous value of von Seeckt’s work, the impact of which is covered thoroughly by J. S. Corum in *The Challenge of Change*, Menning believes that the German theorists’ focus on what became known as blitzkrieg was at the expense of operational level study.¹² As a result, blitzkrieg lacked a coherent vision for the conduct of operations.

In *The Russian Way of War*, Richard Harrison seeks to trace the practical and theoretical development of operational art from 1904 to 1941. He considers as the principle factors which impacted upon the development of operational art: the extent to which development owes its inheritance to the practical and intellectual framework offered by the pre-revolutionary army; the impact of rigorous political oversight of the military by the Party that was a feature of post-revolutionary Russia; and the extent to which forced industrialization allowed the military theorists to envisage taking the army to greater levels of adroitness.

Harrison's analysis begins with a review of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05; an "epic of incompetence." He notes that the war had a significant impact upon Russian military thought, but that her defeat was not caused by the failure to understand the principles of operational art, but was rather a feature of:

The almost otherworldly pusillanimity of the command echelon, which, when faced with the choice of attacking or defending, almost always chose the latter. Kuropatkin's offensive efforts were invariably slow in their preparation, began with insufficient forces, poorly coordinated, and all too quickly cancelled at the first sign of resistance.¹³

Harrison states that well before the outbreak of war with Japan, the Russian military had discussed the work of theorists such as Genrikh Antonovich Leer,¹⁴ from whose writings operational art was to develop;

Leer's ruminations on the need to combine the heretofore independent armies into larger groups of armies, operating toward a common goal in a single theater of military activities, was, in retrospect, a seminal event in the development of Russian military thought. Here, in a rudimentary form, was the theoretical justification for organizing what would later become known as the front, an operational-strategic command instance lying midway between the supreme command and the individual field armies.¹⁵

Nezmanov¹⁶ was key in taking Leer's work to a point where the theory begins to crystallize into the solid foundation from which modern operational art could be developed. Nezmanov distilled and advanced many of Leer's concepts and expressed them most clearly in his 1911 work, *Modern War: The Activities of a Field Army*. He reaffirmed the pre-eminence of strategy over operations, stating that strategy determined the overarching military goal, which is to be achieved by conducting a series of operations. At the outbreak of war, strategy would drive the deployment of the forces and, in turn, the operations that they were to conduct. During the war, strategy would regulate operations by allocating resources and orientating the fronts in response to the situation. Consequently, the operation would dominate tactics and determine the number and type of objectives for the tactical actions according to the forces allocated to them.

Harrison's opinion of the importance of Leer is not universally shared. While supporting the important role played by Nezmanov, Dr. Jacob Kipp believes that Leer was Jominian in his approach to strategy, and implies that his work was perhaps less significant than Harrison believes. With reference to the problem of command and control of large formations during the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-78, Dr. Kipp points to the failure of Alexander II's forces to execute rapid, decisive operations against Constantinople:

Leer, interpreted by Moltke as a mid-century Napoleon, believed in eternal principles and laws and had a disdain for the recent unpleasantness in the Balkans. Neither his book on strategy, which dominated the field until his death, nor the guide to his lectures at the [Nikolaevskaia General Staff] Academy . . . addressed the lessons of 1877-78. Leer and his generation looked for didactic tools, rather than evolutionary concepts. In a time of radical change they sought a firm doctrine. The latter slowly ossified into dogma.¹⁷

Having partially resolved the problems of commanding massed forces, the prosecution of the Russian Civil War revealed more flaws in the theory and presented the theorists with an arguably foreseeable challenge. With the techniques for massing forces and breaking into the enemy's lines largely refined, the next question was how to achieve a sustained drive that would destroy the opposing force and its reserves before they could deploy, thus bringing about a decisive victory.¹⁸ Yet while trying to resolve this issue, the military leadership had to consider other more pressing issues.

With the Civil War at an end, and having suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the Poles, it seemed clear that the likelihood of revolution spreading throughout Europe was minimal. Moreover, the Soviet leadership realized that with restless neighbors like Germany, future war was inevitable. Identifiable are four questions upon which the Establishment and debate were to focus:¹⁹

1. Would a future war be a protracted struggle similar to World War I or would it be resolved in a short campaign?
2. Should the Red Army pursue an offensive or defensive strategy?
3. Would future war see a return to the positional stalemate of World War I or would the art of maneuver reassert itself as it had during the civil war?
4. Finally, would a future war be another clash of predominantly infantry armies, or would smaller mechanized forces become ascendant?

Debating these questions led to discussion on the nature of future war. Two opposing camps emerged. On the duration of the future war, there was broad agreement: it would be protracted, at least as long as the Great War.²⁰ Agreement on other matters was more elusive. The debate on whether to adopt an offensive strategy soon refocused

into a debate about the merits of a “strategy of attrition” versus a “strategy of destruction.”

The strategy of attrition, for which Svechin was the proponent, tended to comprise the more traditionalist aspects of the military specialists. They sought victory using the indirect approach, whereby pursuance of the path of least resistance would gradually accumulate political, economic and military advantages in preparation for delivery of the knockout blow. The spokesman for those supporting the strategy of destruction was Tukhachevsky who, ironically, had become the unofficial spokesman of the Red Commanders.²¹ Tukhachevsky countered Svechin with the charge that his approach was defensive and would lead to an overly protracted conflict that the country could ill-afford. He believed that the Red Army should attempt to bring about the defeat of its opponent by the swiftest means possible: destruction of their army.

By accusing Svechin of promoting defensive warfare, Tukhachevsky either misread or sought to purposely taunt his academic adversary. Dr. Kipp notes that Svechin was never a proponent of a defensive strategy, but was rather a realist who proposed that the Red Army must be mindful of its abilities.²² Supported by Trotsky, Svechin argued that in the event of a war with a technologically superior power with a better ability to mobilize, the Soviet strategy should initially be defensive. Counseling that the Red Army should withdraw initially into the country’s vast spaces in order to gain time and draw upon its greater manpower base prior to an offensive, the attritionalists were accused of defeatism and of lacking revolutionary spirit. It is ironic that long after such ideas had been declared anathema, circumstance forced the Red Army to adopt an even more extreme variation of this strategy in 1941-42.²³

Triandafillov's seminal work *The Nature of Operations of Modern Armies* discussed future war while avoiding specific and limited discussions on the attributes of attrition or destruction. His work focused more on the mechanics of defeating a future opponent; specifically the nature of offensive maneuver and the breakthrough battle. Triandafillov advocated a series of offensives along intersecting axes designed to surround, capture and destroy the defender. Having dealt with the enemy's tactical defense and his reserves, he envisaged that the envelopment be heavily reinforced with mobile formations to carry the attack into the enemy's depth. Triandafillov understood the complexity of such operations and foresaw the need to coordinate attacks, which would often be separated by a considerable portion of static front.²⁴

In Triandafillov's discussion of the theory of deep operations and simultaneity, he saw beyond the Red Army's overwhelmingly infantry-centric nature to a time when the Army would have sufficient mechanized forces to achieve maneuver and so realize his ambitious plans. In order to achieve the break through required for the conduct of deep operations, at least before the advent of the *descant* capability, Triandafillov devoted a great deal of thought to "successive operations." He believed in the efficacy of such operations as a means of achieving strategic goals and demanded that the shock army be able to conduct a series of consecutive operations from beginning to end based upon its own resources, a methodology that was eventually reborn at Kursk in 1943.

Understanding that an army is unable to defeat its enemy with a single blow, Tukhachevsky outlined the essence of his concept for the offensive employment of armies, groups and fronts:

There is no need to attack all across the front. . . . On the main axis it is essential to concentrate a force many times superior to that of the enemy, not only in infantry, but also artillery, aviation, and other technical service troops. . . . One has to take risks by leaving secondary frontages weak. . . . Victory comes only through a series of successive operations.²⁵

Varfolomeev, a disciple of Tukhachevsky, was perhaps more concise when he stated that victory is now achieved through:

An entire series of operations, consecutively developing one after the other, logically linked between themselves, united by the commonality of the final goals, and each achieving limited, intermediate goals . . . the operation's goals--the destruction and complete rout of the enemy's armed force; the method--an uninterrupted offensive; the means--a prolonged operational pursuit, avoiding pauses and halts and realized by a series of consecutive operations, of which each is an intermediate link on the road to the final goal, achieved in the final, decisive operation.²⁶

Notwithstanding the constructive work outlined above, operational theory did not follow a smooth path; the many positive steps were matched by retrograde ones. By 1936, however, the Red Army had a solid framework of operational doctrine; a priceless asset that Stalin's military purges were soon to destroy.

Part II – The Reality of war: An Overview of Literature Covering the History of the Eastern Front, November 1942--October 1943

Sources that discuss the theoretical aspects of operational art offer an idea of what the Red Army might have been able to achieve in a future war. To identify the contribution made by Soviet theorists in the execution of the war against Germany, it is necessary to compare theory and reality. Part II of this chapter deals with events on the eastern front and the texts that provide the historical references for this paper.

Many of the works referenced offer opinion and insight into numerous aspects of the Russo-German struggle from different viewpoints. Ziemke's *Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East* provides a rich account of the struggle that took place in

Manstein's Army Group South area of operations.²⁷ While he is able to provide fascinating insights into the command relationships of the Germany army in the east, the narrative focuses almost completely on the German perspective. Certainly, his observations on the German chain of command are not matched by similar insights into the Red Army. Yet Ziemke's book represents an outstanding historical resource, and it provides a mass of detailed information on the German army and background to the decision making process of the German leadership.

For a similar level of information on the Red Army, two works are notable. *Scorched Earth* by Paul Carell is a fascinating text but one that is caveated by its heavy bias in favor of the German Army.²⁸ Carell provides a huge amount of information on the tactical aspects of the "Race to the Dnepr," and he intersperses his historical chronology with fascinating minutiae. Carell writes in the style of a novelist and therefore he is able to maintain a pace and level of interest that is more akin to a personal account of events, rather than an historical work. However, his style does lead to questions about the historical accuracy of his account. One has to wonder about the degree of poetic license exercised by the author when, for example, recounting conversations between staff officers. The greatest value of *Scorched Earth* lies in its capacity to remind the reader of the human cost of war. Carell relates admirably stories of individual suffering and bravery. When conducting a study of the theoretical aspects of operations on the eastern front, it is too easy to forget the unimaginable suffering, sacrifice and brutality of the fighting. Carell reminds us of the real cost of war, thus his book provides an essential human counterpoint to the theoretical aspects of the study, which should never be far from the forefront of a soldier's mind.

John Erickson's outstanding volume, *The Road to Berlin* is to the Soviet position what Ziemke is to the German.²⁹ He views Stalingrad as the turning point for the fortunes of the German Army, and it is with Hitler's refusal to surrender the city that the book begins. Erickson conducted a series of interviews with Soviet commanders in the 1960s, and he provides a wealth of detailed information on Soviet front and army operations, battles and campaigns. Unfortunately, in a book that covers the period from 1942 to 1945, Erickson's analysis of the period covered by this paper is limited. However, his book contributes to the historical framework of the campaign, thus allowing for a detailed analysis of the general situation between August and December 1943.

Colonel David Glantz has written widely on many aspects of the war in the east, and several of his works relate specifically to the period covered by this paper. Their worth, other than simply being excellent histories of the period, lies in the inclusion of new information obtained (apparently by somewhat dubious methods) from Soviet, and now Russian Archives. As a result, David Glantz is often able to work from previously unseen primary and archival sources. *When Titans Clashed*, is perhaps Glantz's seminal work. His coverage of the battles after February 1943 up to the *rasputitsa*--the thaws and rain that comes to the east in February and March, meaning literally "roadless times"--and then after CITADEL is incredibly detailed. The maps allow the reader to plot the actions of fronts, armies and even divisions, and it is through Glantz's blow by blow analysis of the battles that took place between Army Group South and the forces of Vatutin, Konev, Golikov and others that von Manstein's brilliance is realized. Glantz shows that Manstein's ability to conduct economy of force missions throughout his army group area to mass forces in one location for a counter attack is the mark of genius.

In *The Battle of Kursk*, Glantz, again writing with Jonathan House, provides the most thorough dissection of Operation CITIDEL, KATUZOV and RUMIANTSEV. His access to previously classified documents provides insight into the minds of the STAVKA leadership. From his coverage and analysis of CITADEL, one begins to see a shift in the eastern front paradigm that, until this point, saw the Germans meet with one operational success after another.

The most detailed accounts of the period under examination appear in two overlapping texts. In the early 1980s, the Center for Land Warfare sponsored a series of annual weeklong conferences entitled *The Art of War Symposium*. A forum for Russo-Soviet experts to discuss various campaigns, the title of the 1984 meeting and subsequent transcript was *From the Don to the Dnepr: Soviet Offensive Operations December 1942--August 1943*. Packed with detail, perhaps the greatest benefit of these meetings was the discussions with veterans of World War II who attended as guest speakers. The 1984 symposium, for example, listed amongst its participants: General von Mellenthin, formerly Chief of Staff of XXXXVIII Panzer Corps during the period under examination; General Graf von Kielmansegg, who served in the Operations Section of the OKH; General von Blumroeder, Manstein's intelligence officer; and General Niepold, Chief of Staff of 12th Panzer Division, to name but a few. The discussion and analysis of German operations and engagements are enriched in a unique way by these former Wehrmacht general officers. In addition to the detailed history briefings that comprise each volume, the transcripts provide a unique perspective on the war.

In *From the Don to the Dnepr* (1991), Colonel Glantz builds upon the facts provided in the 1984 *Art of War Symposium*, and adds analysis to produce excellent detail on operations between Soviet and German forces between December 1942 and August 1943. To achieve maximum fidelity on each engagement, Glantz breaks down front operations into their army component parts. The entire book covers Operations LITTLE SATURN; GALLOP (Donbas); STAR (Khar'kov); and RUMIANTSEV (Belgorod-Khar'kov). The result is a rich, analytical account of the campaigns.

In all of Colonel Glantz's books mentioned above, traces of the War College Art of War symposia transcripts is evident. Moreover, the conclusions that he draws from a most thorough analysis reflect his belief that one reason above all others was responsible for the change in fortunes of the Red Army. He attributes the increased incidence of Soviet operational victories to their improved understanding and employment of operational art.

However, the extent to which the reemergence and utilization of operational art was responsible for Soviet success is debatable. Clearly, a combination of factors were responsible. Other opinions on the German decline after March 1943 are provided in the last group of literature that has been influential in shaping this paper. The memoirs of a few select officers, while undeniably self-serving, offer the perspective of the decision makers. Manstein's *Lost Victories* is essential reading for a study of war on the eastern front. Not only does he provide many personal diary entries, he also gives a clear impression that the continual interference of Hitler was responsible for German failure. His accounts of crisis meetings with the Fuehrer demonstrate that the operational commander was denied freedom of action when he most needed it.

Alexander Stahlberg, Manstein's aide for two years, also provides a perspective on the relationship between various commanders such as Rommel, Kluge and Hitler in his book *Bounden Duty*, and so it is worthy of some study. So too is *The Rommel Papers* by B. H. Liddell Hart, and Rommel's memoirs, *Panzer Leader*. Although more egotistical than von Manstein, Rommel tends to support the former's view that Hitler was in no small way responsible for Germany's collapse in the east.

For the Soviet perspective we turn to the excellent memoirs of General of the Army S. M. Shtemenko and his two-volume work *The Soviet General Staff at War 1941-1945*. Serving as head of GHQ's Operations Directorate, Shtemenko's observations are illuminating. Notwithstanding the clear ideological bias against the "Nazi imperialist enemy," he offers an almost day-by-day account of the key operations in which he participated, and by quoting official memoranda and orders he illustrates the often confusing and always complex environment in which the STAVKA operated. More informative and balanced than Zhukov's memoirs, Shtemenko's books, while not revealing GHQ "warts and all," nevertheless offer a view of an organization that, during the period in question, was only slowly coming to grips with their ascendant position in relation to Germany.

In conclusion, the texts summarized in Part I and II of this chapter each provide half of the equation. By comparing theory with practice and achievements, it is possible to identify the extent to which operational art contributed to Soviet success. The research methodology is therefore straightforward. By identifying where the tenets of prewar operational art feature in Soviet operational planning and execution, and by examining the results of these engagements, we can evaluate to what degree success was the result

of applied military art, and whether other factors played a more significant role. Where other factors are important, their effect will be analyzed. The envisaged end state of this research is to have identified the significant factors that allowed the Red Army, defeated by the Germans in the 1942 winter offensives, to succeed in pushing the Germans back over the Dnepr River in summer 1943.

¹The differences between the Russian *doktrina* and the western understanding of doctrine are discussed in Chapter 1.

²Carl W. Reddel, ed., *Transformation in Russian and Soviet Mil History: Proceedings of the Twelfth Military History Symposium* (Washington D.C: United States Air Force Academy, Office of Air Force History, 1990), ix.

³Richard W. Harrison, *The Russian Way of War: Operational Art, 1904-1940* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 135.

⁴Varfolomeev, quoted in Richard W. Harrison, *The Russian Way of War: Operational Art, 1904-1940* (University Press of Kansas, 2001), 157.

⁵*Ibid.*, 187.

⁶V. K. Triandafillov, *Nature of Operations of Modern Armies*, ed. Jacob W. Kipp (Oregon: Frank Cass and Co., 1994), 90-92.

⁷Richard W. Harrison, *The Russian Way of War: Operational Art, 1904-1940* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 145.

⁸Shimon Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory* (Colorado: Frank Cass and Co., 2000), 2.

⁹*Ibid.*, 214.

¹⁰Bruce W. Menning, "Operation Art's Origins," *Military Review*, 77, no. 5 (September-October 1997), 38.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 39.

¹²Harold R. Winton and David R. Mets, eds., *The Challenge of Change: Military Institutions and New Realities, 1918-1941* (University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, US, 2000). Chapter 2, Corum, J.S. *A Comprehensive Approach to Change: Reform in the German Army in the Interwar Period*. Contains a thorough discussion of the German

General Staff's approach to lessons from WWI, led by von Seeckt whose insight was remarkable.

¹³Ibid., 23.

¹⁴General G. A. Leer, 1829-1904. Author of works on strategy; from 1889-1898 he served as Chief of the General Staff Academy. Harrison states that in Leer's work can be seen the earliest attempt to provide a systematic study of operations and to incorporate this study into the existing fields of strategy and tactics.

¹⁵Ibid., 26.

¹⁶General-Major Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Nezmanov, 1872-1928. Graduated from the General Staff Academy in 1900; taught at the General Staff Academy and Military Engineering Academy from 1915-1925.

¹⁷Jacob W. Kipp, "Mass, Mobility, and the Origins of Soviet Operational Art, 1918-1936," in *Transformation in Russian and Soviet Military History* ed. Carl C. Reddel (Washington DC: USAF, 1990), 90.

¹⁸Ibid., 95.

¹⁹Richard W. Harrison *The Russian Way of War: Operational Art, 1904-1940* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 127.

²⁰Ibid., 127.

²¹Ibid., 130. Tukhachevsky was born into the provincial gentry in 1893 and was a (minor) noble and a specialist, having graduated from a Military Academy in 1914.

²²Jacob W. Kipp "Mass, Mobility, and the Origins of Soviet Operational Art, 1918-1936," in *Transformation in Russian and Soviet Military History* ed. Carl C. Reddel (Washington DC: USAF, 1990), 103.

²³Richard W. Harrison *The Russian Way of War: Operational Art, 1904 - 1940* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 130.

²⁴Ibid., 150.

²⁵Mikhail N. Tukhachevsky, *The Problems of High Command*, Vol. I (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), 142.

²⁶Varfolomeev, quoted in Richard W. Harrison, *The Russian Way of War: Operational Art, 1904-1940* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 133.

²⁷Earl F. Ziemke, *Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East* (Washington D.C: Government Printing Office, 1968).

²⁸Paul Carell, *Scorched Earth: The Russian German War, 1943-1944* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1971).

²⁹John Erickson, *The Road to Berlin: Continuing the History of Stalin's War with Germany* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1983).

CHAPTER 3

DEFEAT FROM VICTORY

This two part chapter will discuss Soviet operations from late 1942 to March 1943. Part I will discuss the events following the defeat of the German 6th Army at Stalingrad up to the conclusion of the Soviet Winter Offensive in March 1943. During this period, Soviet momentum following Operation URANUS placed the Red Army firmly on track to achieve a considerable victory over the Germans. However, by the time the *rasputitsa* arrived, many of the Red Army's geographical gains were lost to the enemy. Part II will analyze the issues and events that led to operational defeat of the Red Army during this period.

Part I--The Soviet Winter 1942--1943 Offensive

Despite German efforts to rebuild the Eastern Army in early 1942, they were incapable of resuming the offensive along the entire eastern front. Instead, Hitler executed Operation BLAU on 28 June 1942, which concentrated most of the available panzer forces into the southern half of the German theater. The objective was to seize the Soviet oil fields in the Caucasus. By September, the battle between German and Soviet forces at Stalingrad was representative of the battle of wills between Hitler and Stalin. Stalin ordered that the city be held. Hitler, obsessed with the symbolism of Stalingrad, assured the German people that it would be taken.

The German 6th Army under General von Paulus had the task of capturing the city. However, located at the end of a supply line that stretched hundreds of kilometers, and reliant upon the poor quality troops of Italy, Hungary, and Romania to defend her lines of communication and flanks, 6th Army's position was fundamentally weak. Within

the city, mobile operations gave way to urban fighting in which both sides bled heavily for each city block. Meanwhile, Stalin and the STAVKA planned the counterattack.

General von Paulus and the German Supreme Command (OKW) knew 6th Army was vulnerable and anticipated an attack. However, they underestimated not only the scale, but also the nature of the assault with which the Red Army sought to encircle the German force. On 19 November, Vatutin's Southwestern Front launched operation URANUS. The following day, the Stalingrad Front, commanded by Colonel-General Eremenko, joined the fray. Once surrounded, the fate of the German 6th Army was sealed. Hitler refused to permit Paulus to breakout, and attempts by von Manstein's forces to achieve a relief in place failed. The Soviet operations of LITTLE SATURN and RING reduced Paulus' force to two pockets within the city. On 31 January 1943, Field Marshall Paulus and the forces of the southern pocket surrendered. The northern pocket fought on until 2 February. Of the 90,000 German prisoners taken, only 5,000 subsequently returned home.¹

Some historians have suggested that the Battle of Stalingrad represented not only the turning point of the war in the east, but also that the Red Army "had become as proficient in the art of mobile armored warfare as their former tutors."² However, the STAVKA's subsequent actions seem to disprove such a statement. Before examining the Soviet operations that followed Stalingrad, an analysis of the lessons learned by the Red Army at Stalingrad helps to explain their future operations.

The Soviet plan for dealing a deathblow to German forces was predicated on achieving an encirclement. Yet, while such operations may look simple on a map, the Red Army learned the hard way that execution was anything but straightforward.

Notwithstanding the successes of Korsun'-Shevchenkov, Jassy-Kishinov and Berlin, examples of Red Army encirclements of German forces are few in number throughout the war.

An encirclement requires an initial penetration of the enemy defense, exploitation of success, and subsequent link up of the exploitation forces to complete the circle. In Operation URANUS the Red Army relied heavily upon its tank forces. However, it is significant that URANUS saw the first employment of the new mechanized corps, containing three mechanized brigades and a tank brigade. This represented a more balanced approach to the force structure, and one that exhibited a better distribution of mechanized infantry able to operate effectively with armor.

Operations MARS and URANUS sought to regain the strategic initiative on the eastern front and set the Red Army on the path to total victory. With Stalin's approval, Zhukov and Vasilevsky led planning for two twin phased strategic offensives, with each of the four planned operations given the code name of a planet. Operations MARS, delayed until November, would use the forces of the Kalinin and Western Fronts to encircle and destroy the German 9th Army in the Rzhev salient. A few weeks later, Operation JUPITER would see the Western Front's 5th and 33rd Armies, together with 3rd Guards Tank Army, attack along the Vyazma axis, link up with the MARS force, and go on to encircle and destroy all German forces east of Smolensk. Vasilevsky would launch Operation URANUS in mid-November in order to encircle the German 6th Army at Stalingrad. The follow-on operation, SATURN, was planned for December and would seize Rostov, encircle German Army Group "B" on the Sea of Azov, and cut off the withdrawal of Army Group "A" from the Caucasus.³

Having formulated a plan, the Soviet High Command had to sequence operations in order to achieve the encirclement. They learned in 1941 that centrally issued directives and strategic control were ineffective methods of coordinating multi front operations. They therefore developed the system of *predstaviteli* STAVKI--effectively representatives of the STAVKA--whereby key commanders such as Zhukov, (who was effectively in this role at Yelniya, Moscow and Stalingrad), Vasilevsky, and Voronev, coordinated the operations of groups of fronts on behalf of the STAVKA from headquarters near the frontlines.⁴ The system provided for timely reinforcement of engagements, and enabled early commitment of centrally held reserves that could provide additional combat power to single or multifront operations as required.

Operation MARS, subsequently branded Zhukov's greatest failure, failed to meet its objectives. Operation URANUS however, was a success, and in a burst of optimism the STAVKA discussed plans to accelerate the offensive and push German forces back to the Dnepr line. During the Battle of Stalingrad, Chief of Army Staff Vasilevsky kept a small group of staff officers, under the direction of N. I. Bokov, working on plans for a strategic counteroffensive.⁵ This group had planned URANUS and SATURN and were put to work again to capitalize on their earlier success. The ambitious plan involved two operations: GALLOP, which sought to liberate the Donbas region and drive the Germans over the Dnepr River, and STAR, which sought to liberate Khar'kov. Both plans were predicated upon the belief that German forces were in a weakened condition following Stalingrad. Moreover, with the German 6th Army defeated, five additional Soviet Armies were available for tasking. The Red Army had good reason to be optimistic.

The Soviet plan to destroy an estimated seventy-five German divisions in the Ukraine incorporated the actions of three fronts. The Voronezh Front (60th, 38th, 40th, 69th, and 3rd Tank Armies) would seize northeastern Ukraine, including Khar'kov, with a final objective being a line running through the cities of Rylsk, Lebedin, Poltava. The Southwestern and Southern Fronts were to liberate the Donbas (Donets Basin) and eastern Ukraine. Vatutin's Southwestern Command was to use "mobile groups" to outflank German forces in the Donbas from the west, pinning them against the Sea of Azov (see appendix A for the locations of forces).

Subsequently, 2nd Panzer Army in Orel was to fall victim to an offensive launched by the Bryansk Front and Western Front. Once the Central Front, formed from units that fought at Stalingrad, launched its attack, fresh Soviet armies would drive through Bryansk and Smolensk and into the German rear, whereupon the Kalinin and Western Fronts would encircle and destroy Army Group Center. Finally, the armies of Northwestern Front would destroy the German troops in the Demyansk area and open the way for large reserve formations to move to the rear of the German units fighting against the Leningrad and Volkhov Fronts.⁶

The Donbas operation (GALLOP) and the Khar'kov operation (STAR) began on 29 January 1943 and met with initial success. By 6 February Soviet forces had created huge gaps in the Germans' defenses north and south of Kursk and between Kharkov and Slavyansk, and were approaching Kursk, Belgorod, Kharkov, Slavyansk, and Voroshilovgrad. The STAVKA believed that the German position around Kursk and Kharkov and in the Donbas would become untenable if Soviet forces could accelerate their offensive actions. More importantly, indications were that the entire German

defense in southern Russia was in danger of collapse. The Soviets concluded that if this was so, then German Army Group Center's southern flank was also vulnerable. Given the damage Soviet forces had already inflicted on this Army Group during their failed MARS offensive in the fall, there was every reason to be optimistic about prospects for expanding the winter campaign to encompass operations against Army Group Center. However, as the offensives continued, it became increasingly clear that the German forces would not bend easily to the will of their enemy.

As Soviet forces advanced in February 1943, the STAVKA reverted to its traditional offensive form in word and deed. The Soviet High Command ignored the warnings of commanders who sensed disaster. Intelligence reports portrayed a grossly overoptimistic enemy picture. One example is illustrative of the mindset at this time:

On the eve of the looming German counteroffensive (on the evening of 19-20 February) Soviet air reconnaissance observed large German tank concentrations near Krasnogrod, noted the forward movement of equipment from Dnepropetrovsk, and detected the regroupings of tank forces from the east toward Krasnoarmeiskoye. Nevertheless, in an estimate dated 201600 February 1943, Lt Gen S.P. Ivanov, chief of staff of Southwestern Front, assessed the movements of German XXXXVIII Panzer Corps as a withdrawal movement from the Donbas to Zaporozh'ye. Based on that conclusion Vatutin ordered 6th Army to continue its advance and demanded that the front mobile groups "fulfill the assigned mission at any cost."⁷

The Soviets were fighting their plan instead of the enemy.

In the north of the Donbas, Khar'kov changed hands again. Soviet execution of the Khar'kov operation was initially successful, with armies penetrating German lines to a depth of fifteen to twenty kilometers on the first day. Manstein sought to maneuver forces to prevent the loss of Khar'kov and Belgorod against the combined forces of 40th and 69th Armies and 3rd Tank Army, who were intent on encircling the cities.

On 8 February, after a hard fight against Moskalenko's 40th Army, Manstein was forced to withdraw his forces from Belgorod to new defensive positions covering Khar'kov. Facing 40th and 3rd Armies, the SS Panzer Corps under General Hausser was pressed hard. Hitler had ordered that Khar'kov be held at all costs. By 14 February, however, 40th Army threatened critical German lines of communication running west and southwest from the city. Fearing a repeat of 6th Army's fate, General Hausser requested of General Lanz, to whose Army Detachment he was subordinate, permission to withdraw from Khar'kov. Despite Lanz's refusal Hausser ordered an independent withdrawal of his troops from the city on 15 February. By the time the order was countermanded, troops from Golikov's Voronezh Front had opened a final assault on the city from the west, northwest, and southeast. Soviet troops quickly occupied *Das Reich's* defensive positions. Heavy street fighting raged into 16 February, but mindful that their flanks and lines of communication were increasingly vulnerable, the Germans gave way. By noon on 16 February, 69th Army's 15th Tank Corps and 160th Rifle Division, 40th Army's 160th and 183rd Rifle Divisions, 5th Tank Corps and elements of 3rd Tank Army were fighting in the center of the town. Grossly overmatched, the fragmented German garrison was forced out, and yet despite the push by 12th Tank Corps and 111th Rifle Division to cut off exits to the south, the Red Army failed to encircle any sizeable German force. (See appendix B for the dispositions of troops around Khar'kov).

Following the German withdrawal, Golikov was faced by the very real problem of having units and headquarters of three armies entangled within the city. Confusion reigned and operations were paralyzed for three days while forces were reorganized and repositioned. By the time that Golikov was ready to continue his advance, he had

provided SS forces to the south and southwest of Khar'kov with time that was vital to prepare their defenses.

By the end of February, the German mobile defense in the Krasnograd area had worn down 69th and 3rd Tank Armies. Nevertheless, indicative of the STAVKA's unrealistic attitude towards the situation the Red Army faced in the Donbas, orders to the Voronezh Front issued on 26 February required that the thinly stretched 40th Army press on to Sumy and Poltava. Two days later, when 20th Guards Brigade (with no remaining tanks), 59th Tank Regiment, 4th Guards Tank Destroyer Regiment and 183rd Rifle Division had failed to make inroads to Sumy, the STAVKA finally realized that the Southwestern Front was in full collapse. Golikov was ordered to release control of 3rd Tank Army, commanded by Lieutenant General Rybalko, to his southern neighbor in order to blunt the German advance from the southwest towards Khar'kov and establish a defense in the Kegichevka area. With little ammunition and fuel, 3rd Tank Army ran into the advancing SS Panzer Divisions *Totenkopf* and *Das Reich*. By 5 March, 3rd Tank Army was a shambles. Its two tank corps and accompanying three rifle divisions were either destroyed or encircled in the Kegichevka cauldron. Shockwaves from the defeat of 3rd Tank Army were being felt not only on the Southwestern Front, but ominously, throughout the Voronezh Front as well.

The 1st and 4th Panzer Armies had achieved greater success than von Manstein thought possible, and by 28 February he was able to order Hoth, commanding 4th Panzer Army, to begin the attack towards Khar'kov and von Mackensen to push to the Donets in the area of Petrovskoye. Despite the thaw, both armies made rapid progress. By 5 March, 4th Panzer Army in five days had covered eighty-five kilometers and was fifteen

kilometers south of Khar'kov. On the same day, 1st Panzer Army had reached the line of the Donets. The temptation to push on to Khar'kov was great, but ran the risk of being stopped by the mud. However, following a sudden drop in temperatures on 7 March, Manstein took the chance. His plan was bold and relied upon cutting the Soviet lines of communication from the west, attempting an encirclement from the north. By 14 March the city had fallen, and with it resistance west of the Donets collapsed. On the morning of 18 March, the SS Panzer Corps recaptured Belgorod in four hours. The Voronezh Front, fearing a continuation of the German advance, began to prepare defenses on the east bank of the Donets. Manstein had considered crossing the river to straighten out the German defensive line, but his Army commanders counseled against such a move, reporting that their troops were exhausted and that a defensive line built along a river outweighed the advantages of a shorter line on the open steppe.

The winter offensives ended with the thaw. South of Belgorod, Army Group South occupied approximately the same line the Germans had held before the summer offensive of the previous year. North of the city the Russians occupied a large bulge west of Kursk.

Notwithstanding their strategic success, the Soviet post-Stalingrad offensives, notably the Donbas and Khar'kov operations, ended in operational disaster which saw entire armies explode in a mass of sparks under von Manstein's counteroffensive. Part II of this chapter will analyze the factors that denied the Soviets the ability to achieve operational victory against a heavily worn down German force.

Part II – Hard Lessons

Soviet theorists laid strong foundations in operational art in the 1920s and 1930s and yet, notwithstanding Moscow and Stalingrad, operational successes remained generally elusive until the summer of 1943. The first part of this chapter covered the failures of the winter 1942-43 offensives following the Battle of Stalingrad. Part II will analyze why these offensives failed and how the Germans were able to achieve an operational “victory” on the heels of the initial disaster reeked upon them during Operation URANUS.

Although branded operational failures, the Soviet Donbas, and Khar’kov-Kursk offensives had achieved much: the German 6th Army was encircled at Stalingrad; the Italian 8th and Hungarian 2nd Armies were destroyed; the German 2nd Army suffered heavy casualties and the 17th Army was isolated in the Crimea. German strength was reduced by half, but its defense never collapsed in the way that the STAVKA had expected.

Analysis of what led to Soviet collapse is complex. Why did the Red Army make unforced errors at the operational and strategic level? How could the STAVKA exercise such poor judgment? The search for answers reveals a seriously flawed operational design that continued to exhibit structural defects as late as March 1943. To understand the reasons behind the Soviet operational defeat after Stalingrad, it is necessary therefore to examine not only strategic and operational errors, but also the grand strategic environment.

At the strategic and operational level, David Glantz identifies the fundamental mistakes that serve to explain why the Soviet high command failed in the early months of 1943, many of which can be attributed to an overly optimistic view of the campaign and a fundamental lack of command experience. First, the Soviets paid inadequate attention to the condition and offensive capabilities of their own forces. For example, the divisions in 1st and 3rd Guards Armies, 5th Tank Army, and 6th Army had been in continuous combat since 16 December 1942, with many units operating at between forty and sixty percent of their assigned strength. The uninterrupted length of the campaign reduced the divisions' combat support. Many large artillery pieces that were used at Stalingrad had yet to be moved following the successful conclusion of the battle, and many were in need of repair after months of winter use.⁸

Second, the German 6th Army fixed significant Soviet forces until mid-February. Forces that were directly involved in and around Stalingrad included 5th Tank Army, the 21st; 24th; 51st; 57th; 62nd; 64th; 65th; and 66th Armies and their supporting arms.⁹ As a result, these forces were unable to affect the course of the Donbas and Khar'kov operations.

Third, the Soviets did not consider the German ability to reinforce units, nor did they take account of the fighting spirit possessed by even heavily attrited units, which allowed them to fight on with great effect despite low numbers. Even before the Red Army launched operations STAR and GALLOP, German forces had taken considerable losses during URANUS. Field Marshall von Manstein recorded that as early as mid-January 1943, Army Detachment Hollidt's four infantry divisions (62nd; 294th; 336th and 387th) were in bad shape but were able to have an effect.

[The divisions had been] very badly worn down in the fighting to date. Also helping to hold the front were some 'alarm units' and--a valuable buttress, these-- anti-aircraft units commander by the seasoned General Stahel. As for the Army Detachment's two Luftwaffe field divisions, what little was left of them inevitably had to be incorporated into army formations. The main strength of the Army Detachment was constituted by 6th and 11th Panzer Divisions, augmented by the newly arrived 7th Panzer. The badly mauled 22nd Panzer Division had to be disbanded.¹⁰

The German ability and willingness to achieve so much even with heavily attrited forces was indicative of a further issue that the STAVKA failed to note.

Finally, it is necessary to consider the Soviet failure to correctly anticipate the response of the German High Command to the 1943 offensives that followed URANUS. Knowing Hitler's character, the German's were never likely to withdraw and could be counted upon to conduct "a major skillful counteroffensive, a counteroffensive ironically produced by Hitler's insistence on forward defense blended with Manstein's insistence on operational maneuver."¹¹

It emerges that one cardinal mistake lies at the root of the Soviet operational defeat in the 1942-43 winter offensive: the Red Army commanders consistently underestimated their enemy. Few sources better address this aspect of the War than the memoirs of General of the Army S. M. Shtemenko. From incorrect assumptions that formed the basis of a bad plan, through to lamentable execution, Shtemenko's memoirs explain why success at this stage in the war remained elusive. From his position in the Soviet General Headquarters he identified that the prevailing opinion, following the launch of operations by the Voronezh Front, was that a great victory had been achieved which had created the conditions for a potential exploitation. It was at this point that the Red Army lost sight of its objectives, and what it could realistically expect to achieve:

Thanks to these two January operations, the enemy's front was gravely weakened over a considerable length. Meanwhile, GHQ and the General Staff had already conceived plans for a further offensive. The idea was to exploit the enemy's sudden weakness on the Kastornoye--Starobelsk line and gain quick possession of Kursk, Belgorod, Khar'kov, and the Donets coalfields that the country so badly needed. . . . A favorable situation has arisen for the encirclement and piecemeal destruction of the Donbas, Transcaucasian and Black Sea enemy groups,' GHQ wrote at the time. . . .Let me recall GHQ's assessment of the results so far achieved. GHQ estimated that on the Volga, the Don and in the Northern Caucasus, at Voronezh, in the area of Velikiye Luki and south of Lake Ladoga, the Soviet Army had smashed 102 enemy divisions. More than 200,000 officers and men, up to 13,000 pieces of ordinance, not to mention other material, had been captured.¹²

Based on these facts alone, it was understandable that the Soviet General Staff concluded that, "the enemy's general behavior south of Voronezh and as far as the Black Sea was at that time assessed by many front commanders and by GHQ as a forced withdrawal across the Dnepr with the intention of consolidating on the western bank of this formidable water barrier. It was considered indisputable that the initiative we had seized at Stalingrad was being firmly maintained, and that the enemy had no chance of regaining it."¹³

Shtemenko goes on to describe how Operations STAR and GALLOP were launched without the resources necessary to support them. Several warning signs should have been heeded. The resupply situation was far from ideal, since logistics depots created to support the Battle of Stalingrad found themselves supporting forces on overly long lines of communication. "The troops had advanced far to the west and were now separated from the lateral railways by distances of 250, 300 and even 350 kilometers."¹⁴ This was before execution of Operation STAR, which sought to achieve a penetration of almost 250 kilometers. Of equal importance was the condition of the Voronezh Front, which was to implement GHQ's plan: "The Voronezh Front attacked with its armies in

line and almost without reserves. It was the same with the South-Western Front under General Vatutin. In this kind of situation any follow up of a success or parrying of unexpected developments naturally constituted a very difficult problem.”¹⁵ To describe the concept of launching an operation that sought to breach German defenses without reserves as being “a very difficult problem” is perhaps an understatement.

The results of the Operations STAR and GALLOP have been discussed. In short, the Red Army had culminated even before it launched these operations. General Shtemenko identified the root of the problem as being one of over confidence:

It seems to me that under the influence of the major victories achieved by our troops at Moscow and Stalingrad, certain military leaders, including some at GHQ and on the General Staff, began to underestimate the enemy’s potential. This had an adverse effect on the preparation of some operations and resulted in the haphazard thinking that went into our offensive against Khar’kov. . . . Evidently, it would have been wiser to halt the offensive of the Voronezh and South-Western Fronts back in January, switch temporarily to the defensive, move up the logistical services, bring the divisions up to strength and build up supplies of material.¹⁶

It is perhaps understandable that the initial success of Operation URANUS and the early destruction reeked upon the Axis forces in November and December 1942 raised Soviet expectations. The battle was going well at this time and, as Shtemenko’s insights explain, it is far easier to judge with hindsight when a gamble should have been taken. The Red Army might have succeeded. However, the mistakes Shtemenko refers to are illustrative of the flawed operational design onto which the Soviet military clung. These errors in judgment point to a fundamental problem. To understand why the Soviets failed in March 1943, it is necessary to outline briefly events that preceded the outbreak of war.

By early 1937, the Red Army was in good shape. Chapter 2 discussed the robust doctrinal base that had been developed during years of debate and study into operational art. This, in turn, drove the procurement process. Cooperation with the Germans, which began as early as August 1918, provided the Soviet military with a robust staff system and blueprints for relatively advanced weapons.¹⁷ Lastly, following World War I and the Civil War, the Red Army had a cadre of experienced professional soldiers at its head. Their experiences differed from those in the west. Tukhachevsky, for example, had experienced success in the civil war but was taught a lesson on overextending forces to the point of culmination by General Josef Pilsudski at the Battle of Warsaw, which he would not forget. The Red Army should therefore have found itself in a position to conduct effective operations against the Germans in 1941. Clearly this was not the case.

On 28 April 1937, an article in *Pravda* stated the necessity for the Red Army “to master politics as well as techniques,” asserting that the Army existed “to fight the internal as well as the external enemy.”¹⁸ Sinister implications indeed. The armed forces, which until this point were spared the bloodletting that had engulfed the country for several years, were about to lose their immunity. Tukhachevsky, who had crossed swords with Stalin in the Russo-Polish War, was first to be implicated in an anti communist plot, and the arrests of other officers by the NKVD followed. And so began the purges, indiscriminately cutting down military specialists and red commanders alike.

By the time that the bloodletting subsided in the fall of 1938, over 40,000 people had been purged from the army. The statistics are startling. Of Stalin’s five marshals, only the nonentities Budenny and Voroshilov survived. All eleven deputy defense commissars and seventy-five of the Military Council’s eighty members were victims.

Of four army commanders, two were “repressed,” as were all twelve army commanders second class. Of sixty-seven corps commanders, only seven survived, as did sixty-three of the 199 divisional commanders; 221 of 397 brigade commanders were repressed, as were seventy-nine percent of regimental commanders, eighty-eight percent of the regimental chiefs of staff, and eighty-seven percent of all battalion commanders.¹⁹

The writings of the Soviet military theorists were discredited or suppressed. Military theory essentially became whatever Stalin decided it should be, and doctrine, what little there was of it, was pieced together from Stalin’s military speeches. The theory of deep operations was discounted “on the basis that in it were no pronouncements of Stalin and that its creators were enemies of the people.”²⁰ The concept of independent actions of large mechanized units ahead of the front was discredited as an attempt to sabotage the armed forces.²¹ Before the purges, the Red Army had been a vigorous and perceptive body, abundantly equipped and alert for new ideas. In the aftermath, innovation slowed to a walking pace; technique disappeared and the “mass army” reclaimed its position as the proletarian ideal;²²

After 1936, although the definition of operational art underwent few changes, the dynamism with which Soviet theorists investigated operational theory suffered severe reverses. Stalin’s purge of the Soviet military in 1937-38 liquidated the generation of officers who had given definition to operational art and who had formulated the theories of deep battle and deep operations. Tukhachevsky, Egorov, Kamenev, Uborovich, Svechin and a host of others, the cream of the crop of innovative military theorists, were purged and killed. Inevitably their ideas fell under a shadow, and those officers who survived the purges were generally conservative and reluctant to embrace the ideals of their fallen predecessors.²³

The impact of the purges cannot be underestimated. There are obvious drawbacks to killing the majority of a country’s senior military leadership prior to the outbreak of war. However, there are second and third order effects that also had a detrimental effect on

Soviet preparations for war. Of these, perhaps the most grave were the lessons drawn from battles in the European theater before 1941.

The Soviet troops sent to Spain during the Civil War were no match for the elite German forces that Hitler had sent and, to an extent, some false lessons were learned.²⁴ Based on questionable conclusions drawn from the Spanish affair, the Soviet Air Force was re-rolled to concentrate on the provision of close air support to ground troops. Soviet histories of the period attempt to discount the changes to the force structure made before the war, implying that only adjustments were made.²⁵ In reality, the Red Army moved away from large mechanized forces built up by Tukhachevsky, whom Stalin viewed with disdain.²⁶

Tukhachevsky, Svechin, and other formative figures killed during the purges had the military experience necessary to temper theory and practice. As such they were invaluable. They may have drawn different lessons from the Spanish Civil War and indeed from the German invasion of Poland, France and their early success with BARBAROSSA. The blitzkrieg tactics used by Hitler's forces were thought to herald a new form of warfare. Based on Germany's success with armor units, the Soviets realized they had drawn incorrect conclusions on the employment of armor, and set about trying to rectify the situation by frantically rebuilding their tank force. By the time Hitler launched BARBAROSSA, the Soviets were in the midst of their transformation. It was not simple to prepare commanders for regiments, brigades, divisions and corps. Unit commanders promoted to these posts often lacked knowledge and experience, "which could not be replaced by mere aptitude and devotion to duty."²⁷

Thus the unintended consequences of the purges are seen. Constant changes to the Soviet force structure made fighting the Germans more difficult. Alterations made to their armor forces that began before the invasion continued into the spring of 1942, when the Red Army began the long process of restoring their offensive potential by reviving an armored force that could conduct deep operations.²⁸

The purges denied the Soviet military the ability to innovate. The senior leadership was unable to generalize from their very different experiences in Spain, at Khalkhin Gol, and during the Russo-Finnish War. The purges denied the Soviet Army its leadership. In turn, its reaction to events was based upon incorrect deductions. In summary, the purges removed the brain from the body of the Red Army, exposing weakness and uncertainty.

A final word on the far-reaching impact of the purges provides perhaps the most objective and insightful view.²⁹ M. Zakharov was Chief of the Soviet General Staff in the 1960s; his remarks reinforce the hypothesis that the purges, and ensuing unintended consequences, lie at the very root of early Soviet defeats:

The repression of 1937 and successive years brought to the army, as well as the rest of the country, tremendous harm. It deprived the Red Army and Navy of the most experienced and knowledgeable cadre and the most talented and highly qualified military leaders. It had a negative impact on the further development of military-theoretical thought. The deep study of military science problems . . . became narrow. . . . Strategy in military academies ceased to be studied as a science and academic discipline. All that resulted from not only unfounded repression but also from an impasse in science, in particular military science [*sic*]. Military theory, in essence, amounted to a mosaic of Stalin's military expressions. The theory of deep operations was subject to doubt because Stalin said nothing about it and its creator was an 'enemy of the people.' Some of the elements like, for example, the independent action of motor-mechanized and cavalry formations in advance of the front and in the depth of the enemy defense were even called sabotage and for that foolish reason were rejected. Such measures attested to the

about-face in military theory--back to the linear form of combat on an operational scale.³⁰

In conclusion, the Soviet strategic offensives of winter 1942 failed because they pursued objectives that were still out of reach. Yet as this chapter has shown, this was a symptom of a more fundamental problem within the Soviet military. Stalin's purges lie at the root of the Red Army's inability to counter the German onslaught. By removing the experienced leadership of the Army, Stalin set in motion a series of consecutive events that cannot have been foreseen. The loss of the theorists who had provided the Soviet Union with its rich and innovative foundation in operational art denied the Army the ability to draw relevant conclusions from the numerous conflicts in which the Red Army was involved in the late 1930s. The result was that the majority of remaining commanders were either incompetent, inexperienced or too afraid of Stalin to contradict him. General Pavlov, a tank officer who served in Spain, reported to Stalin that "the tank can play no independent role on the battlefield," recommending that the tank battalions be redistributed in an infantry role.³¹ In the Russo-Finnish War the Soviets sought to use wide, outflanking maneuvers to thrust deep into Finnish territory, only to find that they were surrounded and annihilated. As the war progressed, they found that the permanent Finnish defenses on the Karelian Isthmus could be eroded only by steady pressure from tanks and infantry in close support. Even Zhukov, while he was to improve enormously, acted with competence rather than originality at Khalkhin Gol.³² Only after losing almost 500 tanks, and without much consideration of casualties, was his persistence was eventually rewarded.

By ignoring the effect of local conditions in each case, the Soviet military leadership drew on its limited experience to formulate a doctrine of the general offensive, which closely resembled a “steam roller” of all arms reliant upon sheer weight of flesh and metal to generate victories. An inadequate force structure with inexperienced leadership, operating in a chain of command where the supreme commander’s word was absolute, fighting in accordance with an ill-conceived *doctrine*, may eventually have brought results against less sophisticated enemies. To inflict defeat on the German Army, much more was required.

While the offensives of winter 1942-43 did not produce a Soviet victory, it is clear that these months were formative in every sense. The realities of losing in excess of fifty percent of its peacetime strength forced the Army to operate with a poorly trained, poorly equipped force and so the need to reorganize the structure was of paramount importance. The results were beginning to have a positive effect. With each battle lost, experience was gained. The divisional, army, and front commanders who emerged in 1942-43 would lead their units to victory in 1945. With their experience in battle came better understanding of theory. The principles that began to emerge--or re-emerge--in this conflict would be adjusted in the 1943 summer offensives and perfected in 1944-45.

With the *rasputitsa* of March 1943, the environment changed as snows gave way to mud and temporarily denied attacker and defender the opportunity to do anything other than prepare for the next round of offensives. Yet the *rasputitsa* also signified a thawing of ideas in the Soviet General Staff. Stalin began to trust more in the abilities and leadership of his senior generals. The realization that the war could not be won in a single offensive was accepted. Forces were reorganized. Theories from the past gradually

became more palatable. In short, the Red Army had, by March 1943, served its apprenticeship. The forthcoming summer offensives would be of an entirely different nature to those seen before.

¹Richard Holmes, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Military History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 872.

²John Forster, *Germany and the 2nd World War: The Attack on the Soviet Union*, Vol. 4 (London: Frank Cass and Co., 1998), 145.

³David M. Glantz, *Counterpoint to Stalingrad: Operation MARS (November-December 1942): Marshal Zhukov's Greatest Defeat* (On line at www.battlefield.ru)

⁴David M. Glantz, ed., *1984 Art of War Symposium From the Don to the Dnepr: Soviet Offensive Operations--December 1942-August 1943* (Norfolk: Center for Land Warfare, US Army War College, 1984), 42.

⁵David M. Glantz and Jonathan House, *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1995), 145.

⁶John Erickson, *The Road to Berlin: Continuing the History of Stalin's War with Germany* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1983), 45.

⁷David M. Glantz, ed., *1984 Art of War Symposium From the Don to the Dnepr: Soviet Offensive Operations--December 1942-August 1943* (Norfolk: Center for Land Warfare, US Army War College, 1984), 161.

⁸*Ibid.*, 181.

⁹USMA Dept of History maps; World War II, European Theatre; Russo-German War, map Number 24, available online at www.dean.usma.edu/history/dhistorymaps/Atlas%20Page.htm

¹⁰Erich von Manstein, *Lost Victories* (Chicago: Regnery, 1958), 388.

¹¹David M. Glantz, ed., *1984 Art of War Symposium From the Don to the Dnepr: Soviet Offensive Operations--December 1942-August 1943* (Norfolk: Center for Land Warfare, US Army War College, 1984), 181.

¹²Sergei M. Shtemenko *The Soviet General Staff at War 1941-1945*, Vol 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1985), 163.

¹³*Ibid.*, 164.

¹⁴Ibid., 161.

¹⁵Ibid., 164.

¹⁶Ibid., 179.

¹⁷For a detailed breakdown on the degree of Soviet-German cooperation by date, see www.yale.edu/rusarch/trgva.html.

¹⁸Alan Clark, *Barbarossa: The Russian German Conflict, 1941-1945* (London: Cassell and Co., 2000), 34.

¹⁹Ibid., 220.

²⁰William F. Scott, *The Soviet Art of War: Doctrine, Strategy and Tactics*, Harriet Fast Scott and William F. Scott, eds. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1982), 21.

²¹Ibid., 21.

²²Alan Clark, *Barbarossa: The Russian German Conflict, 1941-1945* (London: Cassell and Co., 2000), 34.

²³David M. Glantz, *Soviet Military Operational Art: In Pursuit of the Deep Battle* (Oregon: Frank Cass and Co., 1991), 25.

²⁴It is accepted that German sent its best--the Kondor Legion--to Spain and that the Red Army 'volunteers' were no match for this force. A discussion of lessons learned from the Spanish adventure are more detailed that space in this chapters allows. In short, however, the General Staff view was that the full potential of tanks had not been displayed in Spain and that the Red Army should continue to pursue plans to use tanks, but on a mass scale, with full artillery support. Georgiy Zhukov's successful use of mechanized formations in his defeat of the Japanese Kwangtung Army at Khalkhin Gol in 1939 further reinforced the advocates' view of armored warfare. The Red Army reorganized its tank force in 1938, enlarging the four mechanized corps and renaming them as tank corps. In addition, many of the scattered tank battalions and regiments were consolidated into twenty-five independent tank brigades. For a detailed discussion of Soviet armor in the Spanish Civil war and the lessons learnt, see http://libraryautomation.com/nymas/soviet_tank_operations_in_the_sp.htm

²⁵Sergei M. Shtemenko, *The Soviet General Staff at War 1941-1945 Vol. I* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1985), 28-29. Shtemenko remarks on the re-building of the tank corps as if it was work in progress. In fact, these forces had existed prior to 1937 and were dismantled, their forces being parceled out in support of infantry armies. The statement that the Soviet military was well prepared to fight the German's is false. To build, equip and train tank corps formed in 1940 for battle in 1941 was an impossible task.

²⁶David M. Glantz, ed., *1984 Art of War Symposium From the Don to the Dnepr: Soviet Offensive Operations--December 1942-August 1943* (Norfolk: Center for Land Warfare, US Army War College, 1984), 17.

²⁷Aleksandr M. Nekrich, *June 22, 1941* in *The Soviet Art of War: Doctrine, Strategy and Tactics*, ed. Harriet F. Scott and William F. Scott, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1982), 102.

²⁸For a detailed breakdown of changes to the Soviet force structure from army to brigade level that occurred between mid-1940 and mid-1942, see David Glantz, ed., *1984 Art of War Symposium From the Don to the Dnepr: Soviet Offensive Operations--December 1942-August 1943* (Center for Land Warfare, US Army War College, 1984), 18-22.

²⁹It is recognized that this was written during the era of de-Stalinization at a time when such criticism was not only popular, but was led from the very top of the Party. However, the view expressed by Zakharov is that of the author: the direct and indirect effects of the Purges set the foundations for Soviet defeat prior to December 1942.

³⁰M. Zakharov, quoted in David M. Glantz, *Soviet Military Operational Art: In Pursuit of the Deep Battle* (Oregon: Frank Cass and Co., 1991), 25.

³¹Alan Clark, *Barbarossa: The Russian German Conflict 1941-1945* (London: Cassell and Co., 2000), 35.

³²Khalkhin Gol, also known as the Battle of Nomonhan: The boundary dispute over Khalkhin Gol (Halha River) was 200 years old. The Japanese claimed that the river Khalkhin Gol was the border, while the Soviets and their Mongolian allies claimed that it lay 15.5 miles to the east, passing through Nomonhan. On 28 May 1939 a Japanese force tried to encircle a Soviet-Mongolian force in the disputed area, and pushed through to, and over, the river. Zhukov was ordered to launch an attack with LVII Special Corps (later First Army Group), to destroy Japanese Forces in the area. Using a deception plan, on 19 August Zhukov's 65,000 troops attacked the flanks of the 28,000-strong Japanese force. The battle that followed became the classic pattern for Soviet encirclement: establishing an outer front of mobile forces (tank and Mech brigades) while an inner front, largely infantry, worked to destroy the trapped enemy. The Japanese Divisional Commander and just 400 survivors managed to escape. The Red Army hailed the battle as 'the second perfect battle of encirclement' (after Cannae).

CHAPTER 4

THE FOG BEGINS TO CLEAR

After the wave of Soviet offensives that lead up to March 1943, there followed an operational lull on the eastern front dictated in part by the general exhaustion of the troops on both sides, but also by limitations on movement that came with the *rasputitsa*. Russian and German staffs used the time to study the operational realities and develop plans. Unsurprisingly, the attention of both sides was drawn inexorably to the ominous bulge around the city of Kursk. To the Germans, Kursk presented a near-perfect situation against which to execute an envelopment of a large number of Soviet forces. Operation CITADEL was to be the first offensive of summer 1943.

Part I of this chapter will outline the 1943 offensives that led to the German Army being pushed west over the Dnepr River. Part II will examine how the Red Army was able to inflict such a defeat on the Germans, having suffered a similar fate themselves only four months earlier at the hands of the same group of forces.

On 15 April Operations Order number 6 notified all participants to prepare to launch CITADEL at six days notice at any time after 28 April:

The attack is of the utmost importance. It must be executed quickly. It must seize the initiative for us in the spring and summer. . . . The victory at Kursk must be a signal to all of the world. . . . The objective of the attack is to encircle enemy forces located in the Kursk area by rapid and concentrated attacks of shock armies from the Belgorod area and south of Orel and to destroy [the enemy] by concentrated attacks.¹

July was the date set for the attack. The German plan was for a major two pronged attack. The heavy mobile forces under the command of 9th Army would strike south, from Orel. 4th Panzer Army would launch a similar attack north from Belgorod together with Army Detachment Kempf. (See appendix C, the German plan for CITADEL.)

To the Soviet GHQ it was obvious that the Germans would launch their offensive against the Kursk salient.² The question of how to reverse the fortunes of the Red Army was more elusive. Acting on the advice of Zhukov, Vasilevsky and others, Stalin approved the plan to counter the German offensive, which was to, “concentrate our main forces in the Kursk area, to bleed the enemy forces there in a defensive operation, and then switch to the offensive and achieve their complete destruction.”³

The LUCY spy network provided Stalin with regular updates on Hitler’s intentions, to the extent that the Supreme Commander received notification that the offensive was to start at 0200 on 05 July. At 0130, Soviet artillery fired the largest artillery counterpreparation of the war, badly mauling German forces in their step-off locations. At 0500, Hoth’s forces pressed forward into the murderous fire of *Pakfronts*, which saw whole antitank batteries concentrated often against a single German vehicle. By 10 July, the southern pincer had stalled, failing to penetrate the thirty-two kilometer-deep tactical zone. In the north, the German’s had only penetrated to a depth of thirteen kilometers. At this stage, the STAVKA committed its armies to the fight. The most famous engagement took place as Hoth’s 4th Panzer Army attacked the defenses at Prokhorovka. They collided with Rotmistrov’s 5th Guards Tank Army. 850 tanks, 600 Soviet and 250 German, clashed on the field. The Germans lost over 400 tanks at Prokhorovka and in the surrounding area, and with them this most famous of tank battles.

While Soviet losses were numerically greater, German losses of men and materiel were more significant because they lacked the plentiful reserves of their enemy to reinforce future operations.⁴

The tank battle at Prokhorovka proved decisive. The battle diary entry for SS *Das Reich* on 14 July was prescient, noting that, despite local successes in III Panzer Corps' sector, "it was clear that CITADEL could not succeed, for on both the northern and southern flanks the German advances had not gained the ground expected for them and there was still more than 130 kilometers between the pincers of Kempf's and Hoth's armies--130 kilometers of trenches, minefields and Russian armor."⁵

On Hitler's orders, CITADEL ended on 17 July 1943. Believing that a pause in fighting was likely, Manstein began to reorganize his battered forces. Notably, SS Panzer Grenadier Division *Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler* and the headquarters of II SS Panzer Corps entrained for redeployment to Italy. However, the Red Army did not intend to allow German forces to reorganize, and made preparations to launch Operation RUMIANTSEV, their first strategic offensive of 1943.

Operation RUMIANTSEV was developed by Zhukov and called for a massive assault by the concentrated armies of the Voronezh and Steppe Fronts. A remarkably complex operation, it demonstrated a shift in the Soviet planning and execution of operations. While freeing Belgorod and Kharkov from enemy occupation was part of the plan, the main goal of RUMIANTSEV was the annihilation of two battle weary German forces: 4th Panzer Army and Army Detachment Kempf.

While analysis belongs in the subsequent part of this chapter, it is worth noting the additional points of friction with which the Red Army had to contend. First, the STAVKA chose to strike head-on the strongest portion of Manstein's defense in order to engage and defeat 3rd Panzer Corps and avoid threats to the flanks of Red Army units; a lesson learnt from the failures of the winter 1942 offensives. Second, Kharkov lay on the boundary between the Voronezh and Steppe Fronts, thus requiring considerable deconfliction and coordination of forces. Third, the Red Army had started to integrate mobile action groups into its order of battle. Thus, in addition to the two tank armies, there were two individual tank corps to conduct operational maneuver. For example, 4th Guards Tank Corps was the mobile group of 27th Army and was supposed to commit to battle on day one, once the infantry had achieved initial penetrations, and conduct shallow tactical penetrations freeing the tank armies to conduct deeper operational-level actions. Fourth, the offensive was planned as a series of sequential attacks, beginning in the Soviet main attack sector north of Belgorod and rippling out toward the Soviet flanks, demonstrating that the Soviets had finally understood how to deny the Germans the ability to flex forces between areas of relative calm and more critical sectors.⁶

The Red Army sought to counter these acknowledged complications by arraying powerful combined and joint forces against an already weakened enemy. In addition to providing additional armor with which to conduct penetrations, the Red Army greatly increased the amount of artillery deployed to support the Belgorod Khar'kov operation, yet another sign of efforts to rectify past mistakes. In the two weeks leading up to the start of RUMIANTSEV, the STAVKA transferred three artillery penetration divisions and a mortar division from the Bryansk to the Voronezh and Steppe Fronts. The

Voronezh Front received an additional three separate artillery brigades and twenty-eight artillery regiments. In total, the ninety *additional* artillery regiments provided the two fronts with a marked superiority over the German forces, often exceeding 120 guns and mortars per kilometer.⁷

Air support to the Voronezh and Steppe Fronts included over 1,300 aircraft, in addition to 200 long range aircraft attached for the duration of the operation. Approximately half of the sorties would provide ground support for advancing targets in the tactical zone. Air operations were conducted within the framework of a sequenced aviation offensive. Air strikes would launch a massive offensive in the preparatory phase against deep and rear targets that could not be reached by artillery. They would then assist with the penetration and exploitation, destroying troop concentrations and artillery.⁸

The STAVKA also provided extra engineer assets to both fronts. In addition to rebuilding or strengthen bridges and improving roads, engineers were used extensively to reinforce tactical and operational deception (*maskirovka*). As part of the STAVKA deception operation, engineers simulated the assembly of an entire tank army north of Sumy.⁹ The engineers also supported the huge logistical effort sought to support the offensive from bases 150-250 kilometers to the rear of the front line. Both fronts relied upon a single track railway and two dirt roads, which drew almost daily attention from the Luftwaffe and required constant repair.

The RUMIANTSEV offensive opened at 0500 on 3 August 1943 with an artillery barrage and air strikes against the German rear. By 1500 the forward detachments of the four tank corps had cleared the first German defensive belt. Yet the offensive met with stiff resistance and success was far from uniform across the front. Penetrations were hard

to achieve and in some cases maneuver groups were committed early in support of the infantry rather than after the breach had been achieved. However, by the end of 3 August, the leading elements of the tank armies had advanced up to twenty-five kilometers and had severed the Belgorod-Tokarovka Road.

By 7 August, the Red Army had driven a fifty-kilometer wedge between Kempf and 4th Panzer Army. Manstein's attempts to stabilize the situation resulted in a series of fluid meeting engagements similar to those seen in February, albeit with a different outcome. As the Red Army pushed southwest, it became over extended and in many cases separated from the infantry. Seeing his opportunity, Manstein counterattacked on 10 August and held up the Soviet advance for almost a week until additional Red Army forces were transferred to continue the advance. The most orchestrated German counterattacks were launched on 12 August. The newly arrived *SS Totenkopf* struck the forward elements of 1st Tank Army approximately fifty miles west of Khar'kov, driving it back over the Merchik River in an attack that wiped out about one third of 1st Tank Army's strength.¹⁰ However, whereas in the past the Germans might have expected the initiative to pass to them at this stage, the Red Army fought instead to regain the initiative. On 13 August, 6th Guards Combined Arms Army and a mechanized corps from 5th Guards Tank Army successfully counterattacked *SS Totenkopf* at the same time as *SS Viking* and *SS Das Reich* attacked 1st Tank Army south of Bobodukov. The fierce battle lasted five days and wore down the forces of 1st Tank Army and 5th Guards Tank Army. Similarly attacks by *SS Das Reich* and *Totenkopf* on 16/17 August ripped into 6th Guards Army and stabilized the sector.

Realizing that the attack had failed, the Red Army shifted its forces, moving 5th Guards Tank Army east. Around Khar'kov a concentration of five armies sought to envelope German forces. Additionally, the STAVKA transferred to Konev at his request control of 5th Guards Tank Army, which had about thirty percent of its armor intact, to sweep round to the west of Khar'kov from its position in the east, attempting but failing to encircle German troops. Despite the failure of the Red Army to destroy 4th Panzer Army, it had subjected it to a bloodletting that it could not withstand, as David Glantz stresses:

German infantry divisions were eroded to mere shadows of their former selves. The 255th and 57th Infantry Divisions emerged from the operation with 3,336 and 1,791 men, respectively. The 332nd, which had already suffered heavily in CITADEL, was reduced to a strength of 342 men. One regiment of the 112th Infantry Division had but 1 officer and 45 men. Panzer divisions fared little better. By 23 August the 11th Panzer's strength stood at 820 panzer grenadiers, 15 tanks and 4 assault guns, while the 19th Panzer Division, minus its commander, General Schmidt, who was killed in the Borisovka encirclement, had only 760 panzer grenadiers and 7 tanks. . . . By 25 August *Das Reich* and *Totenkopf* fielded 55 and 61 tanks and assault guns, respectively, and all of their remaining armor had to be consolidated into a single combat group to parry Rotmistrov's final drive on Khar'kov.¹¹

The casualties inflicted by the Wehrmacht were the high price that the Red Army paid for its victory: over twenty-five percent of the initial Soviet force, or 250,000 troops, were killed or wounded. Equipment losses were even more dramatic. Katukov's 1st Tank Army, which had lost over eighty percent of its initial strength of 646 tanks and self-propelled guns in CITADEL, lost an additional 1,042 tanks in the Belgorod-Khar'kov operations.¹²

As Operation RUMIANTSEV neared its conclusion, the STAVKA opened the summer offensive in full. The Western and Kalinin Fronts launched Operation SUVOROV on 7 August against Smolensk. On 13 August the Southwestern and Southern Fronts thrust across the Donets and Mius Rivers. Within days of the German withdrawal from Khar'kov, the Central Front would focus its attack on the boundary between Army Group Center and Army Group South.

By the end of August, the German hopes of CITADEL were but a bitter memory. The German and Red Armies were engaged in a race to the Dnepr River, the next logical defensive line for Army Group South. The line of the Dnepr had been identified earlier in the year as being a stop-line should German forces be forced back by the Red Army, yet Hitler had rejected preparation of defenses. On 12 August, he changed his mind. The stop-line, known as the Panther Position or WOTAN position, was to run from north Melitopol on the Gulf of Taganrog (Sea of Azov), along the line of the Dnepr past Kiev up to the Gulf of Finland. In his memoirs, von Manstein discusses the problems associated with a withdrawal to a position upon which so much rested and yet which had seen little in the way of preparation to provide for a defense:

The Dnepr could be considered a formidable obstacle so long as it did not freeze over, [and] would be effective only if its defenses were occupied in sufficient strength to compensate for their lightness of structure. But this was just where our weakness lay. German fortification strengths had fallen off to a frightening degree in the incessant fighting of the past two and a half months, and the replacements of personnel and weapons--especially tanks--came nowhere near filling the gaps.¹³

The Soviet offensive subsided briefly between late August and early September, and a shifting of Russian and German forces took place. On 4 September, the STAVKA committed to an offensive in the Ukraine against the left flank of Army Group South. On

the same day, the Voronezh Front, 52nd Army, and several tank and mechanized corps maneuver groups attacked on a broad front that threatened the right flank of 4th Panzer Army. (See map at appendix D.)

Manstein apprised Hitler of the situation at a conference at Zaporozhye on 8 September:

I emphasized that the position on the Army Group's right wing could not be restored *forward of the Dnepr*. On the northern wing of 6th Army the enemy had succeeded in tearing a twenty-eight mile gap in our front . . . with the small amount of armor at our disposal, the counterattack we had already launched could not hope to close it. Whether we liked it or not, therefore, we should be compelled to retire behind the Dnepr, particularly in view of the possible repercussions of the exceptionally tense situation on the Army Group's northern wing. In order to find the necessary forces to sustain this northern wing, I proposed that the Central Army Group should be withdrawn to the Dnepr line forthwith¹⁴

With Hitler's grudging consent, the withdrawal of forces began. Fighting a retrograde operation, Manstein engaged the flanking units of 1st Guards Mechanized Corps and 23rd Tank Corps, which had continued the march west, and inflicted considerable damage on forces of the Southwestern Front.

Kluge sought to withdraw at a moderate pace, whilst balancing the front to the south with transfers of up to four divisions. However, the STAVKA denied him the initiative. North of Smolensk, the Kalinin Front broke through 3rd Panzer Army's right flank, threatening the Panther position. Likewise, pressure by the Western Front on 4th Army was breaking it apart. In the 2nd Army area, the Central Front continued its advance behind the army flank towards Gomel, hub of the most important road and rail junction in the southern part of Army Group Center's area.

By this stage, German units were effectively racing Russian units to the Dnepr line. To prevent the Germans from consolidating on the Dnepr, the STAVKA ordered Red Army forces to cross the Dnepr anywhere and in any manner. Those who succeeded were made Heroes of the Soviet Union. One by one, small groups of determined men attempted the crossing. Most were killed in the process, but in some cases, like that of No. 2 Platoon of 5th Company, 2nd Battalion, 842nd Rifle Regiment, led by Sergeant Nefodov, an individual act of heroism led to significant success. At 0400 on 27 September, Nefodov and his platoon crossed the Dnepr in small boats and succeeded in occupying excellent defensive positions on the western bank, from which they were able to repel German counter attacks. By the evening of 27 September, he had only ten men left. He managed to inform his regiment of his location and that evening, a company of troops crossed in support. By 30 September, 240th Rifle Division managed to transfer two regiments with field artillery and parts of a heavy mortar regiment. The bridgehead now had a front of two miles and a depth of one mile.¹⁵

A seemingly insignificant tactical intrusion into the German line led by Sergeant Nefodov could hardly be deemed an operational threat to Army Group South. However, as General von Mellenthin, Chief of Staff of XXXXVIII Panzer Corps recalled, the tenacity and determination of Russian soldiers meant that even a small breach of a defensive perimeter, particularly given the Russian habit of forming bridgeheads, could be disastrous:

Bridgeheads in the hands of Russians are a grave danger indeed. It is quite wrong to postpone their elimination. Russian bridgeheads, however small and harmless they may appear, are bound to grow into formidable danger points in a very brief time and soon became able strongpoints. A Russian bridgehead, occupied by a company in the evening, is sure to be occupied by at least a regiment the

following morning, and during the night will become a formidable fortress, well equipped with heavy weapons and everything necessary to make it almost impregnable. No artillery fire, however violent and well concentrated, will wipe out a Russian bridgehead, which has grown overnight. Nothing less than a well planned attack will avail. There is only one sure remedy which must become a principle: If a bridgehead is forming or an advanced position is being established by the Russians, attack, attack at once, attack strongly. Hesitation will always be fatal. A delay of an hour may mean frustration, a delay of a few hours does mean frustration, a delay of a day may mean a major catastrophe.¹⁶

The small inroad into German defenses made by Sergeant Nefodov on 27 September demonstrates perfectly Russian exploitation of the situation about which Mellenthin cautioned. By the end of October, the same bridgehead contained three armies, a tank corps and a cavalry corps.

Hitler's indecision and attempts to hold out east of the Dnepr had sacrificed the strength of Army Groups' Center and South. Now that the battle for the Dnepr line had begun, neither Manstein nor Kluge had the means with which to defend. Army Group South alone had to cover a frontage of 440 miles with thirty-seven infantry divisions. By October 1943, the strength of each German division had fallen to an average of 1,000 men. As Manstein noted, "obviously no decisive defense could function on this basis, even from behind the Dnepr."¹⁷ The Russians' manpower advantage had allowed them to rest and refit. Yet most ominous for the Germans, after CITADEL a Soviet mobile offensive for the first time fought German armored units to a standstill without being forced to make subsequent withdrawals in the face of German counter attacks. The damage done to the German army at Kursk and in the ensuing operations ended once and for all any German hopes of conducting strategic offensive operations in the East.

Part II

The following directive refers to conduct of the final battle of Khar'kov. It reflects Stalin's concern that his generals continued to misunderstand the nature of operations required to deny the initiative to the German invaders. More importantly it implies that the Red Army had made changes, and so improved the way in which they conducted operations against the Germans. Stalin felt that things had progressed, and he was correct.

“Sit down and write a directive to Vatutin,” Stalin told me. “You will also send a copy to Zhukov.” He armed himself with a red pencil and, pacing up and down along the table-side, dictated the first phrase: “The events of the last few days have shown that you have not taken into account past experience and continue to repeat old mistakes both in planning and in conducting operations. . . . The urge to attack everywhere and capture as much territory as possible without consolidating success and providing sound cover for the flanks of the strike concentrations amounts to a haphazard attack. Such an attack leads to the dissipation of forces and material and allows the enemy to strike at the flank and rear of our concentrations which have gone far ahead and not been provided with cover on their flanks.”¹⁸

The conduct of the summer 1943 offensives points to a new realism within the Soviet chain of command. The defeat of Operation CITADEL and subsequent Soviet success can, to a large part, be attributed to the reemergence of operational art. However, other factors helped ensure that the Red Army was placed firmly on the road to victory. This chapter will examine the impact of Allied material and combat assistance, improvements in Soviet intelligence and force structure and the German mistakes, all of which contributed to Soviet success.

The defeat of Operation CITADEL set in action a chain of events that denied the Germans the ability to regain the initiative at the operational or strategic level. This fact alone indicates one of two things. Either the German Army had, for whatever reasons lost the ability to conduct large scale, combined arms offensives, or the Red Army had

significantly improved its ability to withstand the impact of the German offensive and understood how to launch more effective offensives of its own. Evidence points to the latter as being the more plausible explanation.

The planning conducted by Soviet General Headquarters for the 1943 offensive indicates that much was learned from the failures of winter 1942. Most important was the management of expectations and an acceptance of what was achievable. Like Tukhachevsky before them, Stalin and his generals began to realize that the enemy could not be defeated with one gigantic blow, but rather had to be defeated by a series of consecutive operations linked by a strategic vision. The Soviet realization that sufficient forces had to be assembled to conduct and sustain the strategic effort throughout its duration and to the full depth of the strategic objectives was critical to success not only in 1943, but throughout the remainder of the war. As a result, the STAVKA regrouped and concentrated forces that it deemed were necessary to execute every phase of the strategic operation. Moreover, STAVKA planners learned to link the ground to the nature of the operation they sought to conduct. They defended where defense was important, and planned subsequent offensive operations to deny the Germans the opportunity to strike vulnerable flanks as they had done to overstretched Soviet forces back in February and March 1943.

The Soviets had ample warning of German objectives for their summer offensive. In March 1943, Marshal Zhukov conducted an extensive inspection of the Voronezh Front, while his staff mounted a major reconnaissance effort of the Central and Southwestern Fronts in order to ascertain the enemy strength, intentions and reserves. On 8 April he submitted a major strategic estimate to Stalin, which was to become a key

document in the planning process. Zhukov discussed enemy intentions and concluded:

It is to be anticipated that this year the enemy will put the chief burden for offensive operations on his armored divisions and his air force, since at the present moment his infantry is much less ready for offensive operations than in the previous year. At the present time the enemy deploys in front of the Central and Voronezh Fronts up to twelve tank divisions, and by drawing off three to four tanks divisions from other sectors, the enemy could commit against our forces at Kursk up to fifteen to sixteen tank divisions with a strength of some 2500 tanks. . . . An offensive on the part of our troops in the near future aimed at forestalling the enemy I consider to be pointless. It would be better if we grind down the enemy in our defenses, break up his tank forces, and then, introducing fresh reserves, go over to a general offensive to pulverize once and for all his main concentrations.¹⁹

As has been shown, this represents the fundamental elements of the Soviet plan.

Yet the formulation of a plan that provided for a strategic defense is indicative of a significant departure from the Soviet military's traditional approach to operations. Thus, for the first time in the war the STAVKA, and Stalin in particular, were able to control their hitherto unbridled optimism and establish more realistic and achievable strategic objectives. Despite what David Glantz refers to as "Stalin's nearly uncontrollable urge to strike first," for the first time in the war he deferred to the wise counsel of his military advisers and accepted the necessity of the initial defensive phase of the operation while acquiescing to the more limited aims of the subsequent offensive actions.²⁰

The Red Army had traditionally misinterpreted the Germans' offensive plans and had concentrated their forces in the wrong areas. Having ascertained that the Kursk salient was the objective, they were able to take measures to prepare for success. Glantz quotes from a classified Red Army document:

Accurate and correct analysis of the situation made it possible to make an absolutely correct decision that was appropriate for the circumstances: to meet the enemy attack on a well-prepared defensive bridgehead, to bleed attacking German groupings dry, and then to shift to a general offensive. The defeat of the enemy shock groups created favorable prerequisites for developing new, extensive

offensive operations. Thus, our defense was prepared with the objective of a subsequent shift to the offensive.”²¹

The acceptance of Zhukov’s advice and the development this strategic plan demonstrate the emergence of a new mindset within the Soviet leadership. Yet advances at the theoretical level were equally matched by corresponding changes to the Red Army force structure. In the fall of 1942, the Soviets had sought to develop an army capable of conducting deep operations. Their solution was to build ad hoc tank armies by welding together the tank corps, separate tank brigades, and rifle divisions and regiments.

This experiment failed for several reasons. First, the rifle forces could not keep up with the tank forces. Second, their commanders had little or no experience in maneuvering formations of this size. However, as has already been noted, the Soviets were learning quickly. For example, General M. M. Popov, who had demonstrated his ability to command a mobile group of four tank corps and a rifle corps in the Donbas, was given command of the strategic reserve at Kursk.²² Erickson goes so far as to state that, “the Battle of Kursk (and the related complex of operations) in 1943 did in fact represent the ultimate graduation of the “class of ’36,” the first intake in the autumn of 1936 to the new General Staff Academy: the first graduates included Vasilevsky, Antonov, M. V. Zhakarov, Vatutin and Bagramyan.”²³ Zhukov, these key figures and others, implemented significant changes to the Soviet force structure between the end of the winter 1942-43 offensives and the Battle of Kursk; rifle armies, for example were made notably stronger (see appendix E for a comparison of Rifle Armies in Summer 1942 and April 1943).

More significant, however, were the changes made to the armor forces. Indicative of the return of elements of operational art, more reliance was placed upon armor forces to conduct deep operations. In early 1943, having learnt from the mistakes made at Khar'kov one year earlier with the prototype tank armies, the Red Army approved the establishment of a new type of fully mechanized tank army. Consisting of two tank and one mechanized corps, it contained over 700 tanks. Five were created by the summer of 1943 specifically to operate as front mobile groups. Committed as quickly as possible and often on the first day of the offensive, the tank corps and armies passed through the attacking infantry to either complete or exploit the tactical penetration.

These forces were preceded by fast moving combined arms forward detachments that bypassed centers of resistance in order to encircle defenders or seize crossings over the next major river line. In this way the Soviets sought to bring about uninterrupted operations that drove deep into the enemy's operational depth. In the opinion of Colonel David Glantz these tactics, combined with the existing tank and mechanized corps at army level, "brought to full fruition a force structure capable of implementing the concepts enunciated in 1936 concerning the exploitation of tactical success into operational success. These new tank forces, first unleashed during the Soviet counteroffensives at Kursk, would spearhead Soviet offensives efforts for the remainder of the war."²⁴ Despite effective counterattacks by German panzer forces, they seldom managed to completely derail Soviet offensives after the Battle of Kursk. (See appendix F for a comparison of Soviet tank armies in summer 1942 and July 1943.)

The winter 1942 offensive, which flowed from the success at Stalingrad, demonstrated the need to launch successive operations rather than an all out attack. Utilizing the forces of four fronts and eighteen combined arms armies advancing in a 700-800 kilometer wide sector to a depth of 120-400 kilometers, the logistic support was unable to sustain such a broad push so soon after Stalingrad, and coordination and resurrecting of attacks was almost impossible.²⁵ By comparison, Red Army planners preparing to launch the counteroffensive in July and August 1943 had grasped the importance of successive operations. The rippling offensives involved ten fronts, forty combined arms armies and five tank armies along a 2000 kilometer frontage to a depth of 600-700 kilometers.

Blitzkrieg sought to deliver a quick, decisive stroke at a perceived point of enemy weakness. An advance to operational depth, and an avoidance of broad frontal engagements, usually with the aim of encircling the enemy force, characterized the ensuing penetration. The Soviets favored a more conservative form of execution. They did adopt the breakthrough and penetration as the basic offensive maneuvers, but preferred to achieve the decisive effect with a few deep thrusts. When conducting successive operations, their concentration of force in the zone of main effort was generally less pronounced than the German model, as well as being less likely to produce a rapid breakthrough, choosing instead to press the main effort with a series of successive and deliberate thrusts.²⁶

In order to achieve the breakthrough, the Red Army invested heavily in combat support elements during the period of force transformation in 1943. Fire support was an essential component of deep operations and was used to achieve the initial breakthrough

for the mobile group of forces. As Appendices E and F reflect, the artillery parks grew significantly during this period, and by the time Operation CITADEL was launched, the Soviet artillery was capable of laying down the sort of fires of an intensity compared to the great battles of the first war. However, in keeping with the maxim that artillery is never kept in reserve, the STAVKA centrally controlled the provision and force-package of fire support. As appendix E shows, the vast majority of fire support for operating armies came from the STAVKA “reserve,” although this term is misleading. STAVKA’s artillery and rocket artillery forces were used continuously to resource offensives across the fronts in order to achieve shock effect and vast weights of fire.

The artillery penetration divisions were the centerpiece of Soviet changes to the fire support establishment, and these were reinforced to become the artillery penetration corps, which were used with devastating effect to announce the start of Operation RUMIANTSEV on 3 August 1943. Glantz notes that “the centrally controlled artillery offensive provided better support of ground troops by subdividing army artillery groups into support groups for first echelon rifle corps. Supporting fires were designated to precede the attack, accompany the attack through the tactical defense, and provide artillery coverage for the advance into the operational depths.”²⁷

The Red Air Force, hammered by the Luftwaffe in the first two years of the war, improved the quality of pilot training and equipment, and was able to contribute to future battles. The Iliushin IL-2 *Shturmovik*, and the Lavochkin LA-5FN--comparable to the M-109 and FW-190--were two aircraft that helped improve the performance of the Soviet Air Force. When combined with aircraft sent from Great Britain and the United States as part of the Lend Lease program, the Soviets at Kursk were able to contest the Germans in

the air on an almost equal footing. Within a few days of the launch of Operation CITADEL, initial German air superiority had become air parity, although surge tactics allowed the Germans to achieve localized superiority for specific attacks.

However, the Soviet's at Kursk did not use the air force to launch attacks deep into the enemy rear. Glantz attributes this to problems with the quality and coordination of fighter cover, which remained spotted and fragile until the following year. Moreover, the Soviets never matched German's ability to enhance the close battle through provision of close air support. Whereas German employment of the Ju-87, which mounted an antitank cannon, was a reasonable success and accounted for a number of Soviet losses at Kursk and Prokhorovka, its performance has been exaggerated. The Red Air Force, however, was only now coming to terms with this new tactic, and while it accounted for between only two and seven percent of overall German tank losses, better aircraft design and weaponry did see improvements in their performance as the war progressed.²⁸

Reorganization of artillery and air support increased the Soviets' ability to breakthrough enemy defenses and conduct deep operations. However, such operations exhibited little finesse. Rather, this period further demonstrates tacit acceptance of yet another tenet of operational art from the prewar years: the path to victory lies in a strategy of attrition. The Soviets focused on wearing down the enemy, rather than using speed to deliver the fatal stroke, as the Germans had sought to do. Svechin, it seems, was increasingly vindicated.

The final transformational aspect of Soviet force structure and operations to be examined here is the provision and employment of reserve forces. The previous chapter discussed the operations of the Voronezh Front and its lack of operational reserves, which

resulted in all but complete destruction of the 3rd Tank Army and subsequent collapse of Golikov's offensive. Again, learning the hard way the Supreme High Command went to great lengths, as General Shtemenko recalls, ensuring for the provision and correct utilization of ample reserves for the summer offensive:

GHQ had taken up the idea of creating a special reserve Front [Steppe Front] at the beginning of March, and on the 13th such a Front was created. It consisted of three field armies and three tank corps. In April this formation was considerably strengthened. Three more field armies were added to it as well as one tank army, yet another tank corps, and two mechanized corps. . . . GHQ and the General Staff had no intention of bringing them into action during the defensive stage of the operation in question. The strategic reserves had been allocated a decisive role for the time when the counteroffensive was launched.²⁹

The Soviet summer offensives pushed the Germans back over the Dnepr. Success, to a large degree, lay in the significant changes that were made to the force structure in early to mid 1943. The Supreme High Command, at a slow but gathering pace, had learned much from the first two agonizing years of the war. A new generation of commanders emerged, many of whom slowly reintroduced the unalterable principles of operational art in all but name: consecutive operations, the deep battle, mobile groups, and so on. Many authors, such as Erickson, Ziemke and Glantz, quite rightly point out that a mixture of brute force, attrition and ill-judged recklessness were present at the operational level of this offensive. However, it is also widely accepted that by the end of 1943, Soviet military theory and force structures were finally synchronized, and provided the formula for victory.

Refinement of operational procedures and formation establishments would, of course, continue as the war progressed. However, it is an inescapable fact that this era saw fundamental changes to Soviet tactics, organization and doctrine which, together

with technological innovations, led to a new conceptual approach to warfare. In short, this period represents nothing less than a Soviet Revolution in Military Affairs, built upon the reemergence of operational art.³⁰ Such innovation is rarely apparent at the time. Innovation and adaptation are messy and even historians--with all the benefits of documentation and hindsight--find it difficult to reconstruct past events with precision. Yet ultimately, battlefield outcomes usually make pitilessly clear which military organization has innovated most effectively. David Glantz provides a most succinct summary. Noting that 1943 was decisive and that the strategic initiative had been seized,

The Soviets would never again lose it. By year's end the force structure was virtually perfected. Only minor adjustments would occur in 1944 and 1945. Most important, Soviet commanders learned to use their forces. The occasional operational failures of 1943 produced smoother operations in 1944. The patient conduct of the strategic defenses in 1943 (Kursk) insured that ensuing years would be offensive ones, without need to resort to the strategic defense. The offensive operations of 1943 paved the way for the successive offensives of 1944 and the simultaneous offensives of 1945. Operational and tactical techniques tested and smoothed out in 1943 would be refined and perfected in 1944 and 1945.³¹

Were it to stop here, this chapter would imply that the improved and overdue Soviet application of operational art was responsible for the seeds of their victory. To a large degree this statement is accurate. The picture, however, is incomplete. In order to present a balanced analysis of the impact of operational art on the 1943 campaigns and offensives, it is necessary to outline other key interrelated factors that also had a significant effect, be it positive or negative, on German and Soviet prosecution of World War II.

The memoirs of former German general officers who occupied influential positions during World War II are highly critical of the role played by Adolf Hitler. General Gottfried Heinrici, Commander of the German 4th Army, wrote in his memoirs that, “it can be said of the outcome of CITADEL: its failure had its basis in Hitler’s operational planning.” His comments on the conduct of operations on the eastern front are equally illuminating:

Hitler’s ideas of taking the unprepared enemy by surprise and, when this proved to be impossible, to make up for the German inferiority by committing stronger technical combat equipment were, as experience showed, an unstable foundation to build a basis for an operation as important as CITADEL. Only a change in the conduct of operations would have been able to secure success against a superior enemy who was prepared for all eventualities. It was also necessary to abandon the inflexible defense and make the transition to mobile operations in which the attacks of the superior enemy forces could be parried by withdrawals until the opportunity for an operational counterstroke offered itself. At the same time, the Eastern Army would have freer use of its available forces in a mobile defense that when tied to the defense of fixed positions.³²

Field Marshal von Manstein was equally critical of Hitler’s decision to delay CITADEL and believed that the operation failed as result:

Operation CITADEL was timed to start in the first half of May, when the ground could be expected to have dried out sufficiently and the enemy would still not have finished refitting--especially his armor. At the beginning of May, however, Hitler decided-- against the advice of the two army group commanders--to postpone CITADEL till June, by which time, he hoped, our armored divisions would be stronger still after being fitted out with new tanks. . . . Nor would he recognize that the longer one waited, the more armor the Russians would have-- particularly as their tank output undoubtedly exceeded that of Germany. As a result of delays in the delivery of our own new tanks, the Army Group was not ultimately able to move off on CITADEL until the beginning of July, by which time the essential advantage of a ‘forehand’ blow was lost.³³

While Hitler’s interference was undoubtedly a factor that affected prosecution of the war in the east, opinions differ as to the extent to which he was responsible for the failings. Alan Clark believes that in many ways, Hitler was the only one man “who

possessed complete insight into the whole strategic picture, and persons who advised him, [Zeitzler and Jodl in this case, who did not see eye to eye] whether on military, economic, or political questions, did so on the basis of their restricted and compartmentalized knowledge.”³⁴

It must be remembered that the majority of senior German officers who wrote memoirs did so in captivity after the war. In many cases, their judgments were a product of their position and circumstance. Some were on the Eastern Front, others were on the Staff, and yet others were in the west. The adage of “where you stand depends on where you sit” would perhaps be appropriate. It should also be remembered that in many cases, these memoirs were published during the Cold War. Understandably, former German officers sought to provide simple explanations for a German defeat, which had subsequently propelled the Soviet Union to the position of superpower, and made the Red Army into a “dreaded instrument of Soviet world expansion.”³⁵

As David Glantz notes in *The Battle of Kursk*, it is unfortunate that most postwar historians have accepted that Hitler’s irrational decision making contributed to the defeat, and believes that “there are now compelling reasons for questioning qualifying, or categorically rejecting these ‘historical truths.’”³⁶ Colonel Glantz is undoubtedly correct, although he omitted to mention that he too was duped by the “historical truths,” writing in 1991, that “an inhibiting factor throughout this period was the interference of Hitler which adversely affected German flexibility and stifled operational imagination.”³⁷ The truth, therefore, lies somewhere in the middle, but it is undeniable that Hitler’s influence was detrimental to German operational planning and flexibility.

A second factor affecting the German Army in the east was the relentless and needling attacks by partisan forces. It is perhaps a little known fact that partisan operations were coordinated with the Soviet offensive at Kursk. Directive Number 006 of 17 July 1943 had assigned particular partisan detachments to the destruction of sections of rail track in the German rear.³⁸ The aim of these attacks was to prevent the withdrawal of 2nd Panzer Army and 9th Army from the Orel bulge, isolating them from their supplies, reinforcements, and their exit. The Central Staff coordinated the partisan offensive, or “*relsovaya voina*” (literally “rail war”) and provided logistic support by pre positioning weapons, ammunition and explosives. In July alone the General Headquarters recorded ten thousand separate demolitions of track.³⁹

Despite this impressive figure, the partisans were only a supporting effort. Perhaps their real worth lay in the unintended consequence of actions. After the winter of 1942-43, when the partisans controlled vast areas of central Russia, Obengruppenfeuhrer von dem Bach-Zelewski instigated a series of drives in which tracts of suspected territory were systematically laid waste, villages burned, and inhabitants executed.⁴⁰ The result of such shortsighted action was to turn the general population against the invaders and towards Stalin's. German atrocities therefore transformed what was originally a semipermissive environment into a nonpermissive environment. Consequently, much needed manpower was drawn away from the front to protect their lines of communication.

Field Marshal von Manstein remarks in his memoirs that he opposed a delay to CITADEL because the “unfavorable deployments in Tunisia could mean that if CITADEL were put off any longer, there would be a danger of its coinciding with an

enemy landing on the Continent.”⁴¹ Allied action in the west clearly had the Germans’ attention. Hitler was aware that Stalin had been pressing Roosevelt and Churchill hard to open another front and relieve pressure in the east. The Casablanca Conference of January 1943 agreed, albeit with Stalin’s absence, that Operation HUSKY would go ahead. It would buy sufficient time to allow training and preparations for OVERLORD to continue and would help assuage Stalin’s protestations about having to carry the weight of the Allied effort.

The Sicily landings that took place on 10 July could not have occurred at a worse time for Germany. When Hitler called an end to CITADEL on 17 July, troops from the east including *Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler* and the headquarters of II SS Panzer Corps, entrained for redeployment to Italy, just as Operation RUMIANTSEV was launched.

While the invasion of Italy undoubtedly aided Stalin, the most significant contribution the western allies made at this time was in their provision of Lend Lease equipment to the Soviet Union. Between 22 June 1941 and 20 September 1945, the Soviet Union received \$10.2 billion of equipment from Great Britain and the United States. In addition to the aircraft sent to the Red Air Force, other items included 409,526 jeeps and trucks, 12,161 armored vehicles (including 2,500 tanks from Great Britain and 3000 from the United States), 325,784 tons of explosives, 13,041 locomotives and railroad cars, and 1,798,609 tons of food stuffs.⁴² The recipients considered much of the equipment sent by the allies obsolete. Certainly aircraft such as the P-39 *Airacobra* could not be described as cutting edge. However, the derision that was poured onto US-made tanks (the M3 Lee medium tank was sardonically named the “grave for seven brothers”) was probably unjustified since allied troops were using the same vehicles.⁴³

Notwithstanding the grudging acceptance of the equipment they were sent, Lend-Lease was essential to the Soviet war effort. Stalin was even heard to praise Churchill and Roosevelt at Yalta in August 1944 for the support they continued to provide to him.⁴⁴

Finally, the continued Allied bombing of German industry affected the war in the east. Most obviously, Germany's ability to replace damaged and destroyed hardware was reduced. Following allied resumption of daylight raids, the US Strategic Bombing Survey concluded that damage to the German railroad system that the country was so severe that the country "could not hope to sustain, over any period of time, a high level of war production."⁴⁵

Once again, however, it was the unintended consequences of allied actions that most benefited the Soviet effort. The continuous allied air raids had forced the Luftwaffe to concentrate its fighter strength in the west to defend against the bomber threat. From March 1943 onward, German fighter losses in the west consistently exceeded those in the east, even at the height of the Battle of Kursk.⁴⁶ Consequently, the few fighter aircraft left in the east were insufficient to escort large bomber forces into the rear areas of the Soviet Union.

This chapter has demonstrated that operational art features clearly in the Soviet 1943 summer campaign. Yet the transformation did not occur overnight. The battles of Moscow and Stalingrad demonstrate that Soviet commanders were gaining experience and learning from past errors. However, the operations such as RUMIANTSEV and SUVOROV reveal the occasional rapid process of change and significant leaps forward that occurred within the Soviet General Staff. As has been noted, Stalin's commanders were also aided by other factors which, when combined, assisted considerably the Soviet

war effort: lend lease; allied operations in the west; intelligence from LUCY, and allied de-codes all played a significant part. The extent to which Soviet success by late 1943 can be attributed to operational art remains open to debate. However, as Vasilevsky notes, whatever the cause, by October 1943 the tide had turned for the German Army in the east:

As a result of the Kursk Battle, the Soviet Armed Forces had dealt the enemy a buffeting from which Nazi Germany was never to recover. It lost thirty of its divisions, including seven panzer divisions. Losses of German land forces amounted to over 500,000 men, 1500 tanks, 3000 guns and over 3500 warplanes. These losses and the failure of the offensive which had been so widely acclaimed in Nazi propaganda forced the Germans to go over to a strategic defense along the entire Soviet-German front. The big defeat at the Kursk Bulge was the beginning of a fatal crisis for the German Army.⁴⁷

Marshal Zhukov echoed Vasilevsky's view of Kursk; "Not only were the picked and most powerful groupings of the Germans destroyed here, but the faith of the German Army and the German people in the Nazi leadership and Germany's ability to withstand the growing might of the Soviet Union was irrevocably shattered."⁴⁸ As Dr. Kipp notes, the benefit of hindsight allows us to see clearly today those aspects of the Soviet war-fighting art that were judiciously understated at the time:

Gradually Soviet society forged the new weapons necessary to conduct such operations. Step by step the Red Army adjusted its force structure to provide the combined-arms armies, tank armies, air armies and tank and mechanized corps to mount such operations. In the final phase of the war Soviet operations achieved what prewar theory had promised. Only after Stalin's death could historians begin to study the roots of these successes during this dynamic and tragic period in Russian and Soviet military history and thus grasp the significance of operational art.⁴⁹

Stalingrad and the winter 1942 offensive inflicted strategic defeat but failed to match it with operational victory. In this respect it represented the beginning of the end for the German Eastern Army. The 1943 summer offensives produced victory at every

level. The race to the Dnepr symbolized the end of the beginning. Kursk was a turning point, strategically, operationally, and tactically. The Red Army learned how to utilize its forces. Front operations were resourced with huge amounts of fire support from both ground and air. Tank armies, the mobile groups foreseen by prewar theorists, were poised to exploit the breakthrough and execute the deep battle. Reserves were on hand to exploit success. As front operations slowed in the face of a brilliantly improvised German defense, the main effort shifted. Consecutive operations denied the numerically smaller German army the ability to flex their mobile forces to where they were most needed. The result was entirely predictable and laid the foundations for the future.

¹David M. Glantz and Jonathon House, *The Battle of Kursk* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1999), 23.

²Sergei M. Shtemenko, *The Soviet General Staff at War*, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1985), 216. Not only did Stalin have access to excellent information from the LUCY network, the fronts had also demonstrated their ability to develop good intelligence. In April 1943, the Military Council of the Voronezh Front issued an assessment which summarized the plans for Op CITADEL: “The enemy’s intention is to deliver concentric thrusts: north-east from the Belgorod area and south-east from the Orel area, so as to encircle our troops located west of the Belgorod-Kursk line.”

³*Ibid.*, 218.

⁴David M. Glantz and Jonathon House, *The Battle of Kursk* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1999), 210-230 and 344.

⁵*Ibid.*, 221.

⁶*Ibid.*, 244.

⁷David M. Glantz, *From the Don to the Dnepr: Soviet Offensive Operations December 1942-August 1943* (London: Frank Cass, 1991), 237.

⁸*Ibid.*, 238.

⁹*Ibid.*, 240.

¹⁰David M. Glantz, ed., *1984 Art of War Symposium From the Don to the Dnepr: Soviet Offensive Operations--December 1942-August 1943* (Norfolk: Center for Land Warfare, US Army War College, 1984), 384.

¹¹David M. Glantz and Jonathon House, *The Battle of Kursk* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1999), 252.

¹²*Ibid.*, 252.

¹³Erich von Manstein, *Lost Victories* (Chicago: Regnery, 1958), 472.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 462.

¹⁵Paul Carell, *Scorched Earth: The Russian-German War, 1943-1944* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1966), 415.

¹⁶David M. Glantz, ed., *1984 Art of War Symposium From the Don to the Dnepr: Soviet Offensive Operations--December 1942-August 1943* (Norfolk: Center for Land Warfare, US Army War College, 1984), 117

¹⁷Erich von Manstein, *Lost Victories* (Chicago: Regnery, 1958), 473.

¹⁸Sergei M. Shtemenko, *the Soviet General Staff at War 1941-1945*, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1985), 249.

¹⁹John Erickson, *Road to Berlin: Continuing the History of Stalin's War with Germany* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1983), 67.

²⁰David M. Glantz and Jonathon House, *The Battle of Kursk* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1999), 266.

²¹*Ibid.*, 266.

²²John Erickson, *Road to Berlin: Continuing the History of Stalin's War with Germany* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1983). 74. Note that in May 1943 Popov was transferred to take command of the Bryansk Front, while Colonel General Koniev assumed command of the Steppe Front ('Reserve Front').

²³*Ibid.*, 74.

²⁴David M. Glantz, *Soviet Military Operational Art: In Pursuit of the Deep Battle* (London: Frank Cass, 1991), 123.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 127.

²⁶Earl F. Ziemke, *Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East* (Washington D.C: Center of Military History, US Army, 1984), 145.

²⁷David M. Glantz, *Soviet Military Operational Art: In Pursuit of the Deep Battle* (London: Frank Cass, 1991), 129.

²⁸David M. Glantz and Jonathon House, *The Battle of Kursk* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1999), 271.

²⁹Sergei M. Shtemenko, *the Soviet General Staff at War 1941-1945* Vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1985), 222.

³⁰The definition of an RMA used here is that provided by Murray and Knox (eds) in *The Dynamics of Military Revolution, 1300-2050* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). For a period or event to constitute an RMA, it must contain recognizable elements including the assembly of tactical, organizational, doctrinal and technical innovation, which combine to implement a new conceptual approach to warfare or to a specialized sub-branch of war.

³¹David M. Glantz, *Soviet Military Operational Art: In Pursuit of the Deep Battle* (London: Frank Cass, 1991), 136.

³²Heinrici, G quoted in David M. Glantz and Jonathon House, *The Battle of Kursk* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1999), 259.

³³Erich von Manstein, *Lost Victories* (Chicago: Regnery, 1958), 447.

³⁴Alan Clark, *Barbarossa: The Russian German Conflict 1941-1945* (London: Cassell and Co., 1995), 323.

³⁵David M. Glantz and Jonathon House, *The Battle of Kursk* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1999), 260.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 260.

³⁷David M. Glantz, *From the Don to the Dnepr: Soviet Offensive Operations December 1942-August 1943* (London: Frank Cass, 1991), 375.

³⁸John Erickson, *Road to Berlin: Continuing the History of Stalin's War with Germany* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1983), 113.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 114.

⁴⁰Alan Clark, *Barbarossa: The Russian German Conflict 1941-1945* (London: Cassell and Co., 1995), 318.

⁴¹Erich von Manstein, *Lost Victories* (Chicago: Regnery, US, 1958), 447.

⁴²Earl F. Ziemke *Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East* (Washington D.C: Center of Military History, US Army, 1984), 501.

⁴³David M. Glantz and Jonathon House, *The Battle of Kursk* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1999), 37.

⁴⁴John Erickson, *Road to Berlin: Continuing the History of Stalin's War with Germany* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1983), 501.

⁴⁵Earl F. Ziemke, *Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East* (Washington D.C: Center of Military History, US Army, DC, 1984), 411.

⁴⁶David M. Glantz and Jonathon House, *The Battle of Kursk* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1999), 39.

⁴⁷Vasilevsky quoted in David M. Glantz and Jonathon House, *The Battle of Kursk* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1999), 279.

⁴⁸Georgi Zhukov, *Marshal of the Soviet Union: Reminiscences and Reflections* Vol. 2 (Moscow: Progress Press, 1985), 194.

⁴⁹Jacob W. Kipp, *Transformation in Russian and Soviet Military History: Proceedings of the Twelfth Military History Symposium* (Washington D.C: USAF Academy, 1986), 110.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The paper sought to analyze the impact of operational art on specific campaigns that took place between Germany and the Soviet Union in World War II. The campaigns of November 1942 to October 1943 were selected because they demonstrate the discernable, even remarkable changes that occurred within the Red Army during this relatively short period. This thesis sought to answer why, given the relative continuity of German and Soviet force ratios throughout the period, the fortunes in battle swung so rapidly from invader to defender.

Chapter 1 explained the Soviet hierarchy of terms. It provided definitions of the key components of the operational level of war that are a necessary pre-requisite to an analysis of operational art. Chapter 2 built upon this initial framework. It outlined the factors that drove Russian and Soviet theorists to develop what became known as operational art. It plotted the process of refinement, which drew not only upon Russian and Soviet experience of many conflicts, but also upon lessons learnt by other countries. Chapter 2 outlined the development and maturation of operational art to the point where, by the mid 1930s, the Soviet Union had established a solid bedrock of operational theory that was second to none.

Given that a consideration of the importance of operational art is at the heart of this thesis, it was necessary to look past 1941 to a time when the Red Army had recovered from the shock of invasion and was offering coherent resistance. Chapter 3 therefore addressed the Soviet 1942 winter offensives. It discussed why the defeat of the German 6th Army was the high water mark of the campaign, and went on to analyze why

the German army was able to effect a series of superb counterattacks that denied the Soviets the victory they believed was within their grasp. Ending with a consideration of lessons learnt that the Red Army drew from this first campaign, the scene was set for the offensives of summer 1943.

Chapter 4 provided an analysis of the battles initiated in July 1943 by Operation CITADEL. Hitler's decisive campaign, a "signal to the world," was stopped in its tracks by Zhukov's outstanding defense of the Kursk salient. Noting the operational achievements of the subsequent Soviet offensive, chapter 4 contrasts the nature and achievements of the 1942 winter offensive campaign with the successes of summer 1943. The German and Soviet forces that fought in the campaigns of November to March 1942-43, and July to October 1943 were similar in many ways. The vast majority of senior officers stayed in their commands. The same ground was contested time and time again, as is demonstrated by the history of the battles for Khar'kov and Belgorod that took place during this eleven month episode. Yet despite the similarities, there is much to distinguish between these two periods. Most obviously, spring of 1943 arrived in the east with German forces in the ascendancy, having struggled back from the brink of disaster to wrestle the initiative from their Soviet adversaries. Summer of the same year found the situation reversed.

It was necessary, therefore, to analyze why the fortunes of war swung so rapidly from the Wehrmacht to the Red Army. Chapter 4 assessed whether the key tenets of operational art outlined in chapter 2 were more visible in the second campaign than in the first. It showed that new equipment and force structures were developed and implemented, and with this came a more expert use of military power. At Orel and

Khar'kov in the summer of 1943, the Red Army had learnt to support infantry assaults with massive artillery preparations, and commit infantry support tanks and self propelled guns to the attack to overcome localized resistance. Once the break in had been achieved, the tank and mechanized corps were launched to either complete the breakthrough or exploit into the enemy's operational depths. Using this cascading torrent of forces, the Soviet Army after Kursk not only destroyed the myth of German invincibility, but also demonstrated that it was finally developing the skills to utilize its huge numbers.

That the Red Army changed considerably the way it fought between January and July 1943 is undeniable. Operation URANUS was an unqualified success. Operations STAR and GALLOP ended in disaster. The decision to defend against Operation CITADEL and the subsequent execution of Operation RUMIANTSEV demonstrated that the Soviet leadership was learning quickly from past mistakes. It was also indicative of a final acceptance of the reality of the situation. Germany would not be defeated by a single campaign. She could not be swept aside by deep thrusts into parts of her line. RUMIANTSEV and subsequent operations indicate that the Soviet strategy became a mixture of attrition and more skillfully executed offensives, as Svechin had foreseen. Equally, in essence if not in name, the concept of deep operations became a focal point of Soviet offensive theory and the means by which tactical success was converted into operational and strategic success

Operational art aside, it is clear that the Red Army's success was aided by many other factors. Chapter 4 went on to discuss the most significant external contributions that strengthened the position and improved the effectiveness of the Soviet armed forces. The benefits of Lend Lease, the allied bombing campaign, partisan attacks, the LUCY spy

network, and the impact of Hitler's personality were just some of the factors that were shown to have shaped the situation that helped the Soviet Union achieve its eventual victory over Germany.

Were this thesis to be a purely historical analysis, then it could end here. However, the history of the fight between German and Soviet forces offers a wealth of valuable lessons and observations that are relevant to modern armed forces in the twenty first century. The Soviet experience demonstrates the importance of peacetime preparedness and a full dimensional approach to force structure and training. In addition, analysis of the Soviet victory in the fall of 1943 demonstrates the critical complementary effects achieved by application of the full spectrum of joint combat capabilities.

The situation in which the Red Army found itself by late 1941 demonstrates the need to have a solid doctrine around which to develop matched training and warfighting capabilities. The Soviet military had a doctrine, but then disregarded it. As a result, Soviet Army operations were not underpinned by a coherent, unifying framework. Without it, chaos reigned. Changes to the force structure were made on an *ad hoc* basis. The chain of command was compromised by the imposition of a political level of command over the military structure; and military and civilian leaders were required to demonstrate loyalty to state, party and its supreme leader or face the most extreme consequences. It was only when Stalin granted military professionals sufficient autonomy in the planning and conduct of operations that the Red Army began to regain internal coherence, and experience consistent battlefield success. The reemergence of operational art brought with it an associated doctrinal framework. This inspired a force structure that matched the capabilities and requirements of the army and encouraged the emergence of

leaders who, through a process of trial and error, had mastered their art and who, thanks to Soviet mobilization and lend lease, had the instruments with which to practice it.

The Soviet experience discussed in this paper validates the approach used by the US Army to design its force structure and training methodology. The US Army today determines its force requirements through consideration of a series of factors: Doctrine, Training, Leader development; Organizations; Materiel; Soldiers (DTLOMS). The Soviet experience in World War II demonstrates the need to have not only a sound theory, but also to have considered all other DTLOMS implications before war occurs. The Red Army learned how best to utilize its doctrine in combat against the Germans, conducting what was in effect “on the job training.” Unlike the Soviets, however, modern armies cannot afford to suffer huge defeats as part of the learning process. Training in peacetime must provide the force with the ability to learn in peace the lessons that the Red Army learnt in war. Materiel, or battle winning equipment, must be developed, fielded, and modernized throughout its life. Modern armies must, in short, be resourced to the highest levels in order to develop robust organizations, conduct sophisticated and realistic training, and educate leaders if they are to be prepared to achieve early and decisive victory.

To make a more fundamentally important observation it is necessary to take a holistic view of the allied war effort against Germany. Such a perspective demonstrates that in the summer of 1943, in contrast to the winter of 1942-43, allied operations against Germany began to reflect the full spectrum of joint warfighting capabilities. Land campaigns were fought across Europe and in Africa. A sophisticated strategic air campaign applied ever increasing pressure to Germany’s economic and population base.

The axis and allied maritime components were reaching the decisive phase of the Battle of the Atlantic. Finally, the effects of what today would be described as a special operations campaign were felt throughout all theatres of war. Most relevant to this study were the operations conducted by the Soviet partisan movement.

However, it is important to note that the application of Joint capabilities described above was not synchronized until mid 1943.¹ The Battle of the Atlantic culminated in the decisive convoy engagements of March-April 1943. Daylight bombing raids over Germany remained small scale operations until the implementation of the Combined Bomber Offensive Plan in June 1943. Operation HUSKY, launched in July, opened a second front on mainland Europe and had a significant impact upon Hitler's ability to concentrate forces in the east. The Soviet partisan movement, whose attacks were synchronized to peak as RUMIANTSEV was launched, denied the Eastern Army freedom of action in their rear area, and siphoned off badly needed troops from the front to provide protection to their lines of communication.

By mid-1943, therefore, the German forces were fighting, in effect, a Joint allied campaign that gradually over-matched their capabilities. The effectiveness of this campaign validates the current Joint approach to operations employed by the US and British military today, which aims to synchronize the land, sea, air, and special forces components in order to bring about the rapid defeat of the enemy.²

The above observations help to explain why the Red Army met with increased success as the war progressed. The resultant conclusion is that it is necessary to exercise a degree of restraint when accrediting the reemergence of operational art with disproportional responsibility for success during this period.

By late 1943, Soviet military theory and force structure had combined into a system that was more capable of delivering success than at any previous time. The Battle of Kursk was indeed a turning point in the war and it demonstrated to the Soviets that they could defeat the German army and consolidate their gains without seeing them snatched back by successful counterattacks. However, operational art did not reappear overnight in 1943 as a blueprint to victory. Changes made to the Soviet force structure, or the reemergence of deep and consecutive operations were not solely responsible for improved Soviet performance against the German army. Studies that seek to explain why the Soviet military was suddenly able to succeed where before it had failed often seek to identify “silver bullets.” There are no silver bullets in this instance.

This paper has demonstrated that 1943 was a transformational year. An improved understanding of how to employ key tenets of operational art was in no small part responsible for the reversal in fortunes. However, numerous other factors shaped the conditions in which the Soviet Army achieved success. Pushing the Germans back across the Dnepr in October represented only the beginning of the end. The Soviet Union had a long way to go before it achieved decisive and final victory. The Soviets had finally identified the road to Berlin, but it would take much more than just an understanding of operational art to get them there. School was in session and the elementary education that the Red Army had received in 1941-42 gave way to the secondary education of 1943. Only in 1944 and 1945 would the Soviets accomplish graduate and post graduate study in the art of war.³

¹It is accepted that even then, any synergistic effect achieved across the entire allied war effort was often brought about more by accident than by design.

²Current US Joint doctrine incorporates space operations in this list.

³David M. Glantz, *From the Don to the Dnepr: Soviet Offensive Operations December 1942-August 1943* (London: Frank Cass and Co., 1991), 376.

APPENDIX A

ARMY GROUP SOUTH DISPOSITIONS, FEBRUARY 1943

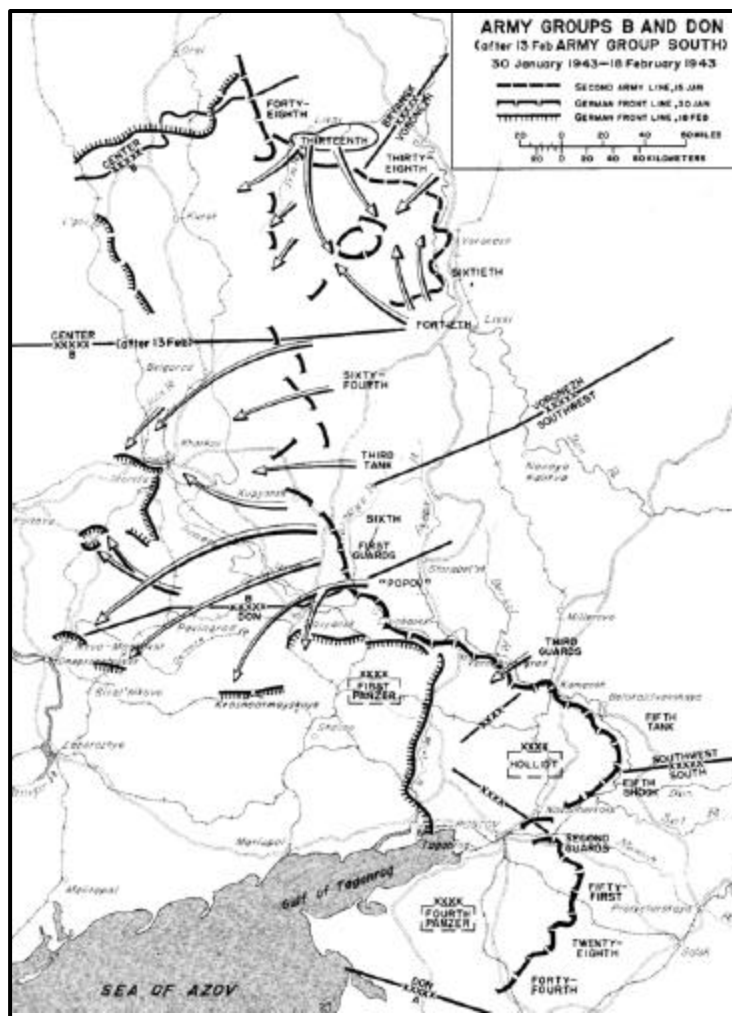


Figure 2. Army Group South's dispositions in February 1943. *Source:* Earl F. Ziemke, *Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East* (Washington D.C: Center of Military History, US Army, 1984), 83.

APPENDIX B

THE BATTLE OF KHAR'KOV, MID-FEBRUARY 1943

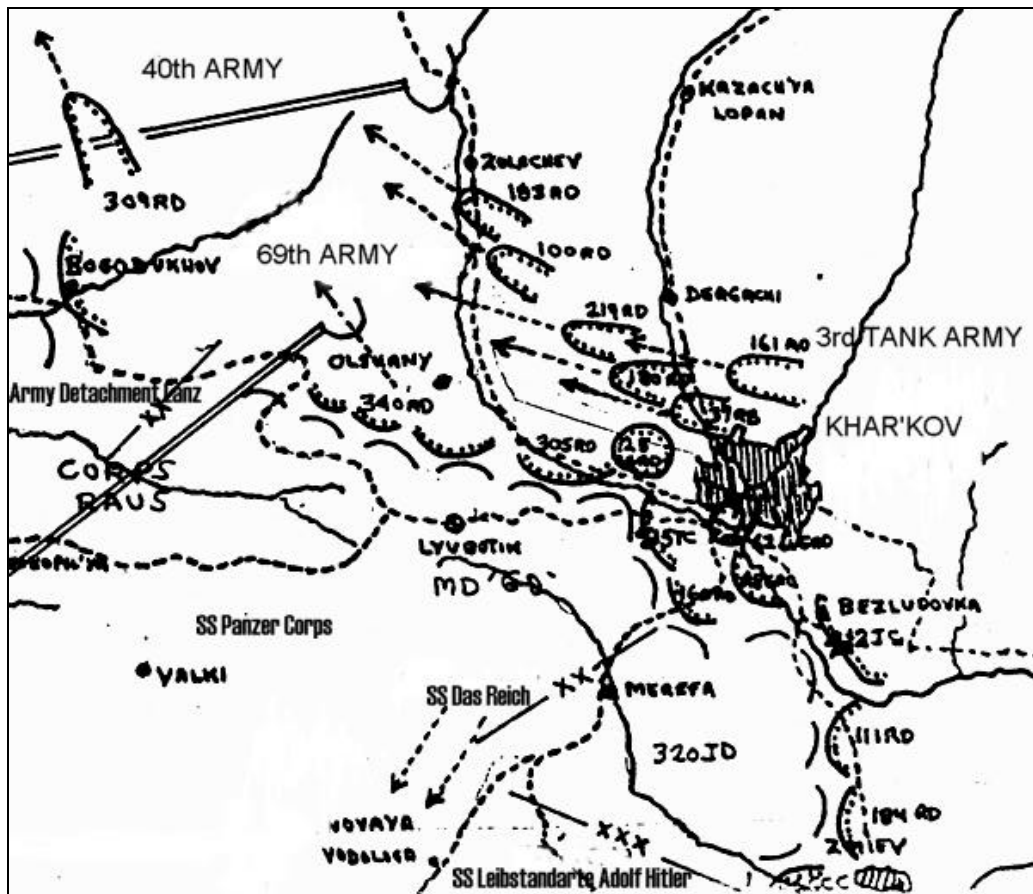


Figure 3. An enlarged portion of the map depicting the situation around Kharkov in mid-February 1943. Source: David M. Glantz, ed., 1984 *Art of War Symposium From the Don to the Dnepr: Soviet Offensive Operations – December 1942-August 1943* (Carlisle: Center for Land Warfare, US Army War College, 1984), 259.

APPENDIX C
OPERATION CITADEL

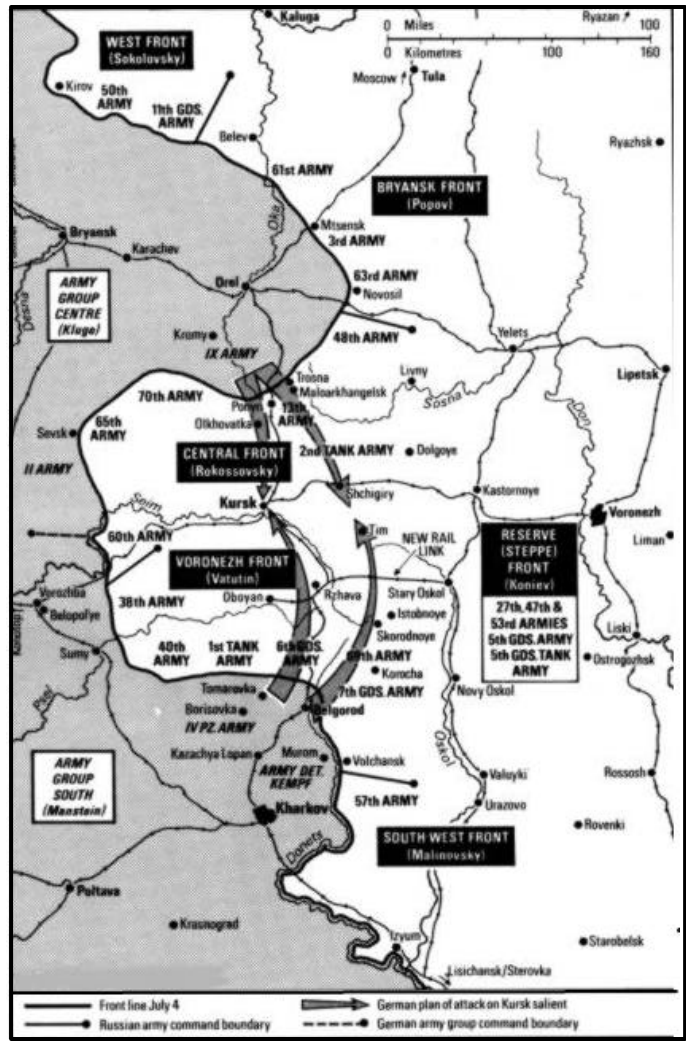


Figure 4. Map depicting the situation prior to and the plan for Operation CITADEL.
Source: Kursk map onwar.com--usable resources online: www.onwar.com

APPENDIX D

SOVIET AND GERMAN DISPOSITIONS, AUGUST 1943

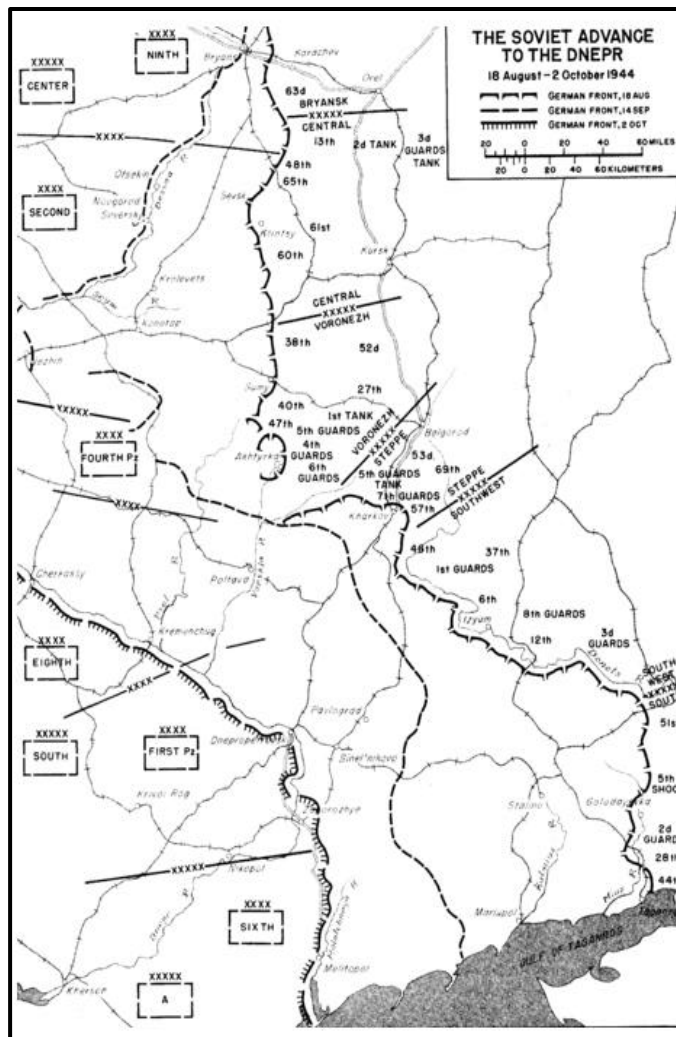


Figure 5. This map depicts the attack by the Voronezh Front on the boundary between 4th Panzer and 8th Armies on 4 September, and that of 1st Guards Mechanized Corps and nine rifle divisions, which penetrated the German line north of the boundary between the First Panzer and 6th Army boundary. *Source: Earl Ziemke, Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East* (Washington D.C: Center of Military History, US Army, 1984), 155.

APPENDIX E

TABLE 1: COMPARISON OF SOVIET RIFLE ARMIES, 1942-1943

| Rifle Army: Summer 1942 | Rifle Army: April 1943 |
|--|--|
| 6-10 rifle divisions or brigades | 3 rifle corps |
| 2-4 tank brigades, regiments or battalions | 7-12 rifle divisions |
| 1 anti-aircraft regiment | 4 artillery regiments |
| 3 artillery regiments | 1 gun artillery regiment (152mm) |
| 1 guards mortar battalion | 1 anti tank artillery regiment (76mm) |
| 1 sapper battalion | 1 anti aircraft artillery regiment (37mm) |
| 1-2 tank corps (optional attachment) | 1 mortar regiment (122mm) |
| | 1 signal regiment |
| | 1 line/communications battalion |
| | 1 telegraph company |
| | 1 aviation communications troop |
| | <i>Reinforced by STAVKA units:</i> |
| | 1-2 artillery penetration divisions |
| | 3 artillery regiments |
| | 3 tank destroyer regiments |
| | 3-4 self propelled gun brigades |
| | 10 separate tank or self-propelled gun regiments |
| | 2 anti-aircraft divisions |
| | 1-2 tank mechanized corps (mobile group) |
| Strength: 80,000-100,000 men | Strength: 80,000-130,000 men |
| 250-450 tanks | 1,500-2,700 guns/mortars |
| 1,000-2,500 guns/mortars | 48-497 MRLs |
| 24-426 MRLs | 30-225 self-propelled guns |

Source: David M. Glantz, *Soviet Military Operational Art: In Pursuit of Deep Battle* (Oregon: Frank Cass and Co., 1991), 104/124.

APPENDIX F

TABLE 2: COMPARISON OF SOVIET TANK ARMIES 1942-1943

| Tank Army: Summer 1942 | Tank Army: July 1943 |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 2-3 tank corps | 2 tank corps |
| 1-3 rifle and cavalry divisions | 1 mechanized corps (optional) |
| 1 separate tank brigade | 1 motorcycle regiment |
| 1 light artillery regiment | 1 anti-aircraft division (64 x 37mm) |
| 1 guards mortar regiment | 2 tank destroyer regiments |
| 1 anti-aircraft battalion | 2 mortar regiments |
| | 2 self-propelled artillery regiments |
| | 1 guards mortar regiment |
| | |
| Strength: 35,000 men | Strength: 48,000 |
| 350-500 tanks | 500-650 tanks/sp guns |
| 150-200 guns/mortars | 550-650 guns/mortars |

Source: David M. Glantz, *Soviet Military Operational Art: In Pursuit of Deep Battle* (Oregon: Frank Cass and Co., 1991), 107/126.

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