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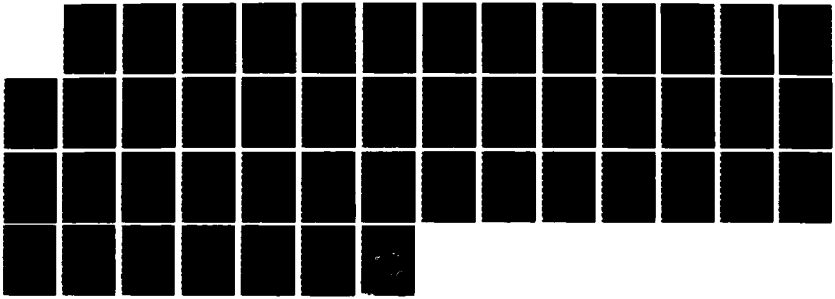

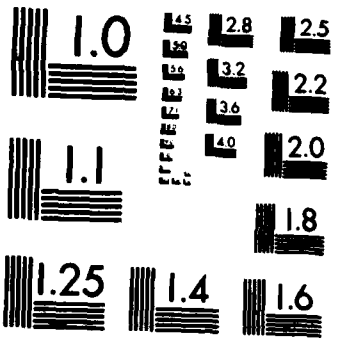

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The Culminating Point--A Viable Operational Concept or Some Theoretical Nonsense?

by

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The conclusion of this study is that the concept of the culminating point must be considered by tactical and operational commanders as an important ingredient in the campaign planning process. It appears that Clausewitz's concept of the culminating point is not some outdated or irrelevant theory, but is a viable concept key to the design and conduct of campaigns and major operations.

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ABSTRACT

THE CULMINATING POINT--A VIABLE OPERATIONAL CONCEPT OR SOME THEORETICAL NONSENSE: An analysis of the theoretical concept of the culminating point, by Lieutenant Colonel Bruce L. Meisner, USA, 39 pages.

This study attempts to determine whether the theoretical concept of the culminating point is relevant today to planning and conducting campaigns or major operations. The study begins with an examination of the culminating point during the conduct of two major WWII operations in which it appears to have played a major role in the outcome of each: (1) Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's drive into Egypt in 1942 which ended at El Alamein, and (2) the combined penetration of the Russian 6th Army and Lieutenant General M. M. Popov's Tank Corps Group into the Ukraine in 1943, which precipitated the third battle of Kharkov. This is followed by an analysis of the various factors involved in the process of identifying the culminating point and a discussion of the role of the commander and his staff in this identification process. The study concludes with a discussion of the utility of this theoretical concept as part of the planning process at the operational level and its applicability to future conflicts and AirLand Battle doctrine.

The conclusion of the study is that the concept of the culminating point must be considered by tactical and operational commanders as an important ingredient in the campaign planning process. It appears that Clausewitz's concept of the culminating point is not some outdated or irrelevant theory, but is a viable concept key to the design and conduct of campaigns and major operations.

Table of Contents

		Page
Section I.	Introduction	1
II.	North African Campaign	3
III.	Operation "Gallop"	11
IV.	Analysis	17
V.	Conclusion	26
	Appendix	28
	Endnotes	33
	Bibliography	38

Section I

Introduction

The link between concepts derived from 19th century military theory and current U.S. Army doctrine on operational art can be somewhat tenuous. The majority of U.S. Army officers are unfamiliar with these concepts, and with their doctrinal relevance. This research paper will describe and analyze the theoretical concept of the "culminating point" as espoused by Carl von Clausewitz and subject this analysis to a historical test through the examination of two major operations conducted during World War II, one by the German Army in North Africa and the other by the Russian Army in the Ukraine.

Clausewitz introduces the concept of the "culminating point" in Chapter Five, Book Seven of On War, entitled the "Culminating Point of the Attack," and elaborates on it later in Chapter Twenty-Two of the same book, entitled "The Culminating Point of Victory." In Chapter Five, Clausewitz refers to an attacker whose force of attack has diminished to a "point where the remaining strength is just enough to maintain a defense and wait for peace." He defines the culminating point as that point beyond which "the scale turns and the reaction follows with a force that is usually much stronger than that of the original attack.[1] In Chapter Twenty-Two, Clausewitz states that "the culminating point of victory is that point in the campaign where the winning side has reached a state of balance in which it could

maintain itself." Clausewitz goes on to say, "The natural goal of all campaign plans, therefore, is the turning point at which attack becomes defense." He points out that going beyond this turning point leads to reactions which "usually have completely disproportionate effects."[2]

The most recent edition of Field Manual (FM) 100-5, Operations, reflects Clausewitzian philosophy when it states, "Culminating points are reached when the balance of strength shifts from the attacking force to its opponent. This happens when an attacker has pushed as far as he can without losing his advantage over the defender."[3] According to FM 100-5, unless an offensive operation is strategically decisive it "will sooner or later reach a point where the strength of the attacker no longer significantly exceeds that of the defender, and beyond which continued offensive operations therefore risk overextension, counterattack, and defeat. In operational theory, this point is called the culminating point."[4]

The purpose of this monograph is to determine whether the theoretical concept of the culminating point is relevant today to planning and conducting campaigns or major operations. The monograph proceeds from a premise that the careful evaluation of this concept within the framework of two major operations of World War II can help determine the concept's current usefulness and value. First, therefore, the concept of the culminating point is examined during the conduct of two major operations in which it appears to have played a major role in the outcome of each: (1) Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's drive into Egypt in 1942

which ended at El Alamein, and (2) the combined penetration of the Russian 6th Army and Lieutenant General M. M. Popov's Tank Corps Group into the Ukraine in 1943, which precipitated the third battle of Kharkov. This is followed by an analysis of the various factors involved in the process of identifying the culminating point and a discussion of the role of the commander and his staff in this identification process. The monograph concludes with a discussion of the utility of this theoretical concept as part of the planning process at the operational level and its applicability to future conflicts and AirLand Battle doctrine.

Section II

North Africa: The Battles of Gazala, Bir Hacheim and First El Alamein (Jan - Jul 1942)

The British Army's Operation "Crusader" ended in December 1941, nine months after Field Marshal Erwin Rommel launched the first spectacular advance of his Afrika Korps across Cyrenaica.[5] Although plagued by some of Germany's strategic logistical inadequacies, as well as those of her Italian ally, Rommel was able to withdraw his forces under pressure by the British while retaining the energy, morale, and cohesiveness of his Korps. Axis logistics problems eased as Rommel shortened his supply lines back to El Agheila. Not only had the distance from the German main supply port at Tripoli to the front lessened, but

difficulties of resupply by sea eased immeasurably as demonstrated by the arrival of fifty-five additional German tanks at Benghasi and Tripoli in late December 1941 and early January 1942.[6]

While Axis problems were lessening, however, British logistics difficulties were increasing. Their lines of communication lengthened significantly during the pursuit of Rommel. In addition, on 12 December 1941, Prime Minister Winston Churchill informed General Sir Claude Auchinleck, Commander-in-Chief of Middle East forces, that reinforcements of two divisions, four light-bomber squadrons, and some anti-tank guns destined for him had to be diverted to the Far East.[7] With his forces thus weakened, Auchinleck then found his command extended to include Iraq and Persia. As a result, the prospects for successful renewal of the British offensive against Rommel in January 1942 dimmed. Correlli Barnett indicates in The Desert Generals that "There were neither troops nor transport to prepare for a fresh advance and at the same time establish a firm base and balanced dispositions for the repulse of a German counter-stroke."[8]

At this stage in the operation, British forces, by their own admission, had reached what Clausewitz termed the "culminating point"--the turning point at which attack becomes defense. Auchinleck's situation had been influenced in part by the following factors: extended supply lines, lowered morale of his troops, an expanded mission, weakened forces (combat losses), inadequate training, and inaccurate intelligence about enemy

forces. Rommel, on the other hand, had fallen back upon his own supply lines, received replacement tanks and fuel resupply, obtained accurate intelligence on the enemy, and preserved the morale and energy of his troops through an organized and effective withdrawal. Rommel had accurately identified the British culminating point and was prepared to exploit it with his rejuvenated Afrika Korps.

The safe arrival of additional tanks, armored cars, anti-tank guns, and supplies from late December 1941 to early January 1942 enabled Rommel to take the offensive again.[9] With fuel and ammunition resupply complete and over 300 German and Italian aircraft available[10], Rommel seized the initiative and launched a surprise attack on the morning of 21 January 1942, only sixteen days after the last of his rear guard retired to El Agheila.[11] His plan for the counterstroke was for "Afrika Korps to make an outflanking drive along the Wadi el Faregh, starting from the southern sector of the front, while the Italians, together with a German combat group, attacked frontally."[12] (Map A) Rommel's forces enjoyed initial success against numerically superior but disorganized British forces operating on extended supply lines. The attacking Germans, however, confronted fuel shortages four hours into the attack, thereby preventing further exploitation by the 15th Panzer Division.[13] Chronic shortages of fuel would continue to plague Rommel in his plans to pursue the British. On 22 January the Germans captured Agedabia, forcing British forces to retire in disorder. Afrika Korps then pushed

forward to the line Antelat-Saunnu and "enveloped a combat group of the British
1st Armored Division, which lost 117 tanks and armored cars, 33 guns, numerous vehicles and thousands of prisoners."[14]

Afrika Korps was redesignated Panzer Army Afrika on 22 January, giving Rommel control of all Axis forces at the front, including Italian units. Rommel's forces continued forward, attacking the British supply depot at Msus on 25 January, capturing 600 trucks, 127 guns, and 280 fighting vehicles.[15] On 28 January, Germans captured the port facility at Benghazi, which contained large quantities of food, fuel, equipment, and more than 1300 trucks.[16] There was no time for rest, however, as Rommel continued to press his forces in pursuit of the retreating British. On 30 January, General Neil Ritchie, Commander of Eighth Army, ordered his forces to fall back to a line at Gazala to cover Tobruk.[17] At the conclusion of this battle, it may be argued that the Germans had reached their own culminating point -- that point in the operation where the winning side has reached a state of balance in which it could maintain itself if it did not continue on the offensive. (Map A) Rommel's fear, however, was that it was only a matter of time before the undefeated British Eighth Army, which lay just across the Gazala line, would be resupplied so that it could strike out against his forces in the desert.

While the German high command struggled with the strategic significance of the island of Malta and their overall plans for the Panzer Army in northern Africa, Rommel used the period from

February to May 1942 to rearm, re-equip, rest, train, and prepare his troops for the forthcoming offensives of the summer.[18] Meanwhile, the British government was making tremendous efforts to provide its Eighth Army with all the materiel it could lay its hands on. In February, Hitler approved a plan to examine the possibilities of a reinforced drive by the Panzer Army Africa across the Nile and into Palestine to link up with other German forces advancing from the Caucasus into Persia. As the British historian Barrie Pitt points out, though, "No drive to the Nile could be launched until a sizeable reserve of supplies had been built up in Tripoli and Panzerarmee Afrika itself considerably strengthened."[19] Key to the resupply for Rommel's forces was the status of Malta--"the windless of the Allied tourniquet"[20] on Rommel's supply lines.

Two German war plans evolved--"Operation Hercules" for the invasion of Malta and "Operation Aida" for the drive to the Nile. In April 1942, the Axis conducted two hundred bombing raids over Malta. These raids permitted a much higher percentage of critical supplies to reach Rommel, but by the end of April he was still short of soft-skinned vehicles and infantry. On 26 May, Rommel launched a preemptive strike against Eighth Army at Gazala with the intent of defeating British forces in the Gazala line, capturing Tobruk, and possibly clearing the desert as far forward as the Egyptian border.[21] (Map B)

Before commencing the attack, some of Rommel's units had as few as 60 of their authorized strength of 400 trucks.[22] After the first day of the attack, Rommel was already expressing

concern at the cost of the battle in terms of men and equipment. His supply situation had also worsened. The urgently--needed supply columns attempting to follow in the wake of his panzer divisions were being attacked and often completely destroyed by raiding columns of British infantry and artillery. Italian forces, having expended all of their ammunition and fuel, commandeered virtually every shell and drop of fuel being brought forward by German supply convoys trying to get through to German panzer units.[23] By 11 June, fatigue of troops had become a factor for both sides, but especially for the Germans. Rommel's forces were driven beyond the point of exhaustion by their commander. On 14 June, crews of the German panzer divisions were so exhausted that they slept in the desert while XIII Corps of Eighth Army escaped.

By nightfall on 15 June, there were no Allied formations west of Tobruk or the Acroma-Bir el Gubi line. Early on 18 June, Rommel's forces invested Tobruk. (Map C) On 20 June, Rommel launched a coordinated air-ground attack against the Tobruk defenses. When Tobruk fell the next day, Axis forces captured large quantities of food and supplies, but were denied the critical commodities of water and fuel which had been destroyed by Allied forces. Rommel, sensing the growing disorganization and weakness of Allied forces, allowed his battle-weary troops little time for celebration; he pressed his forces back into pursuit of the fleeing enemy. By 23 June, Afrika Korps spearheads had crossed the frontier some forty-five miles south of Sidi Omar. The following day they had advanced well over a

hundred miles to reach the coast nearly fifty miles east of Sidi Barrani. By this time, however, Rommel was down to forty-four panzers, a sixty-eight percent reduction from the 139 he had on 21 January. His Italian forces had fared no better. Pitt states that together, the Italian Ariete and Trieste divisions had been reduced to fourteen M13s, thirty guns, and less than two thousand infantrymen.[24] By 25 June, Rommel's forces were once again being subjected to increasingly heavy air attacks.

Meanwhile, Auchinleck relieved Richie and assumed command of Eighth Army forces himself. British defenses at Mersa Matruh were reduced much like the ones at Tobruk, but Rommel's forces continued to be attrited as they pursued Allied forces back into Egypt toward El Alamein. (Map D) On 29 June, Rommel again pushed his forces forward without rest. Pitt indicates that, at this point, "Rommel's staff was so pressed and exhausted as a result of continuous heavy fighting, that they were unable to supply him with a very accurate picture of what lay ahead in the El Alamein defenses."[25] (Map E) Although Rommel's vehicle recovery teams managed to bring his panzer strength up to fifty-five between his two divisions, Rommel remained woefully short of personnel, especially of infantrymen. His supply lines now stretched 300 miles back to Tobruk.

On 1 July, the first battle of El Alamein started. (Map F) Rommel's forces, however had just about reached their culminating point. The morale of his men was deteriorating, and for the first time, panic began to grip the Afrika Korps.[26] The difficult terrain also took its toll on Rommel's forces in terms

of time, manpower, equipment, and fuel. Inaccurate intelligence concerning the disposition of enemy forces plagued Rommel and caused him to adjust his plans. Axis troops were now subjected to continuous bombing from Allied aircraft, which were inflicting serious damage on German supply columns. An excerpt from the War Diary of the 90th Light captures German frustrations at this time: "The German forces, badly exhausted by the heavy fighting and the hardships endured (moving day and night) during the preceding days and weeks, seem unable to take this last English fortress before the Nile Delta with the forces available. The enemy throws the whole of his available air force into battle against the attack of the Afrika Army.... Although the material achievement...is negligible...the moral effect on the troops is much more important. Everyone prays for German fighter protection...."[27]

By 2 July, Rommel decided that the offensive could continue for only one more day. On 3 July, his panzer divisions had been reduced to only twenty-six panzers between them. Italian units fared no better. Ariete, the Italian armored division, was virtually destroyed by one infantry battalion with attached artillery. Pitt points out that "with this news, Rommel knew that the operation which had begun at Gazala five weeks before was now at an end."[28] No matter how Rommel complained, or what orders he issued, his exhausted men could do nothing more against what was becoming a stronger and better organized defense by British forces. On the evening of 3 July, Rommel informed Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, Commander in Chief, Mediterranean,

that he was halting the offensive. Panzer Army Africa had reached its culminating point. Lacking sufficient quantities of men, fuel, and ammunition, Rommel ordered his forces to dig in and to concentrate on holding the ground won. But Axis forces were so drained that they could not cover the El Alamein position. Although Panzer Army Africa inflicted severe losses upon the Allied forces during July-October, it was unable to cope with the overwhelming superiority of British troops and equipment. Rommel's unsuccessful counterattacks during the second battle for El Alamein ended on 3 November, when the British armor began to break through into open ground. By 4 November 1942, Rommel's forces were forced into a general retreat of 2,000 miles from El Alamein to Tunisia.

Section III

"Operation Gallop": The Soviet Donbas Operation (January - March 1943)

During January 1943, the Soviets conducted a series of offensives along the Eastern Front that were designed to erode German strength and produce a total collapse of German forces in southern Russia.[29] (Map G) One of these offensives, Operation Gallop, was conducted by the Soviet Southwestern Front during January - March 1943 to liberate the Donbas region and drive German forces across the Dnepr River. The mission of the Southwestern Front during Operation Gallop was essentially to cut off all enemy groups located in the Donbas and Rostov regions,

encircle and destroy them, and prevent their withdrawal to the west and the evacuation of any of their equipment.[30] (Map H) Colonel David Glantz, a noted U.S. Army historian of the Red Army during WW II, points out that the Southwestern Front "would conduct these new operations without pause using forces weakened by previous operations and tenuously fed and sustained by overextended supply lines connected to increasingly remote supply points."[31]

The Southwestern Front, commanded by General N.F. Vatutin, consisted of four armies (6th, 1st Guards, 3d Guards, and 5th Tank) and a mobile group (Popov). Continuous fighting in December and January had seriously eroded the infantry and tank strength of these units. Soviet rifle divisions had as few as 6-8,000 of their authorized strength of 10,000 men; tank corps had only 30-50 of the 160 tanks authorized and barely fifty percent of authorized personnel strength. In addition, the Soviets lacked motor vehicle transport, which placed a severe strain on their logistic network. Glantz states further, "Most of the supply base areas remained where they had been in mid-December and the Soviets were forced to bring up supplies across the poor road network by use of their scarce vehicles, horses, or sheer manpower. Thus depleted armies were called upon once again to launch deep operations from overextended supply lines."[32] A corollary to this extended fighting was the requirement for the Soviets to protect their lines of communication from German forces operating on their flanks, which in turn further degraded the strength of forward forces to the

point where they no longer had quantitative advantage over the Germans.

While the Soviets were conducting sweeping operations in virtually every sector of the eastern front, the Germans wrestled with the problem of restoring stability to their southern wing.[33] Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, Commander of Army Group Don, was confronted with the problem of restoring the deteriorating situation faced by his Army Group and of convincing Hitler to withdraw forces from the north Caucasus to bolster his units in the Donbas. Hitler was adverse to any voluntary surrender of hard-won territory. He also argued, "if one fought bitterly for every foot of ground and made the enemy pay dearly for every step he advanced, even the Soviet armies' offensive power must one day be exhausted."[34] Manstein stated that "The enemy had now been attacking for two and a half months without a break. His losses were high and he must soon be at the end of his tether. As he drew further away from his standing lines, his supply difficulties would halt any far-flung outflanking movement he might be planning."[35]

By the end of January as forces from Southwest Front pushed into the gap between Manstein's army group defending the Donbas and Army Group B defending east of Kharkov, 1st Panzer Army succeeded in moving five divisions from the Caucasus, through Rostov, into Manstein's sector. Subsequent to its escape through Rostov, 1st Panzer Army assumed responsibility for the defense of the Voroshilovgrad area, while 4th Panzer Army and Army Detachment Hollidt defended along the central and southern

portion of Manstein's lines in the bend of the northern Donets River.[36] In addition, Manstein's forces were bolstered by the arrival of six divisions and two infantry brigades from the West. Although Soviet forces initially made significant advances in late January and early February, crossing main forces across the northern Donets River, their inability to secure the city of Slavyansk became a major obstacle to their offensive. For the Germans, who poured a steady stream of reinforcements into the area, Slavyansk became a key piece of terrain that caused the Soviets to further extend themselves to the west; retention of Slavyansk provided the Germans with an opportunity to conduct counterattacks against the Soviet flank.[37]

As the result of poor road conditions caused by a partial thaw, Popov's Mobile Group had a difficult march just reaching the northern Donets River. Glantz states, "Roads were in such bad condition that his (Popov's) units had to move cross country led by tanks using angle irons just to clear a path through the mud."[38] As Soviet forces were slowed by poor lines of communication (LOCs) and extended supply lines, Manstein continued to shift forces to bolster defenses in the Slavyansk area. By 7 February, Popov's group had fallen short of achieving its initial mission. Frustrated in Southwest Front's attempts to develop the offensive, STAVKA issued new orders on 7 February designed to restore the momentum of the advance. Additional directives followed on the 10th and 11th which reiterated that Southwest Front's mission was "to block an enemy withdrawal to Dnepropetrovsk and Zaporpzh'ye...to press the German Donets group

into the Crimea...to close the passages into the Crimea...and then to isolate these German forces from remaining German forces in the Ukraine."[39] On 11 February, Soviet forces captured Krasnoarmeiskoye and cut the Dnepropetrovsk-Mariupol rail line, an important lateral communications route of Army Group Don.

On 15 February, Popov's 10th Tank Corps linked up with his 4th Guards Tank Corps at Krasnoarmeiskoye. By 18 February, however, the armored strength of 4th Tank Corps had been reduced to only seventeen tanks. Moreover its fuel and ammunition were in short supply. 10th Tank Corps was in no better shape. Glantz indicates, "At one point, 10th Tank Corps radioed Group Popov headquarters that "no wheel was turning."[40] On 19 February, Popov ordered his remaining two tank corps (18th and 3rd) to move to positions in support of his units at Krasnoarmeiskoye.

Despite repeated warnings from his army commanders that troop fatigue, equipment shortages, and growing enemy strength made it impossible to conduct simultaneous attacks in all sectors of the front, the Southwest Front commander insisted on pressing his forces to fulfill his mission of encircling and destroying the entire German Donbas Group.[41] As a result, Soviet forces continued to advance despite extended supply lines and exposed flanks. By the 22nd, 25th Tank Corps was almost out of food, fuel, and ammunition while operating 100 kilometers ahead of its supplies. The Soviets had not made any plans to resupply forces by air. The following day, Soviet escape routes were cut off by counterattacking German forces. With mounting personnel and equipment losses, little or no fuel and ammunition, and no viable

means of escape, lead units of Popov's Mobile Group reached their culminating point. Surviving tank corps personnel from Mobile Group Popov abandoned their equipment as they scattered to the northwest in an attempt to join with other Soviet forces and obtain refuge from the German armored counterattacks.

STAVKA optimism seriously affected the Southwest Front Commander's assessment of German intentions. Glantz has stated that "An air of unrealism and overconfidence had pervaded Soviet headquarters for weeks and colored all aspects of Soviet planning. That mood would spell doom for the Soviet offensive and many of the men participating in it."[42] This air of overconfidence also affected Soviet commanders' assessments of intelligence. On 19 and 20 February, Soviet air reconnaissance observed large German tank concentrations near Krasnograd, identified forward movement of German equipment from Dnepropetrovsk, and detected a regrouping of tank forces from the east toward Krasnoarmeiskoye.[43] Soviets misunderstood these movements, however, assessing them instead to be part of a general withdrawal of German forces from the Donbas. To subsequent Soviet dismay, these movements proved to be in preparation for a German counteroffensive that would destroy Mobile Group Popov and major portions of the Soviet Southwest Front. The remainder of February and March would witness Manstein's counteroffensive pushing the Soviets back across the northern Donets River and ultimately through Kharkov and Belgorod. Operation Gallop, the Soviet Donbas offensive, had reached its culminating point.

Section IV

Analysis

Factors Affecting the Culminating Point

This portion of the paper will analyze those factors which affected the culminating point of Rommel's forces during his counteroffensive against the British Eighth Army during the period January - July 1942 in North Africa and of Vatutin's forces during the Soviet Donbas operation of January - March 1943 against the Germans along the Eastern Front. In his discussion of factors affecting the culminating point of attack, Clausewitz states, "Success in attack results from the availability of superior strength, including of course both physical and moral."[44] One of the most dominant physical factors affecting the culminating point of Rommel's offensive was the continued weakening of his forces (personnel and equipment) caused by constant combat, while operating on overextended supply lines. Vital commodities of ammunition, water, and fuel were always in short supply. In fact, Rommel's 15th Panzer Division was out of fuel and incapable of pursuing British forces only four hours after the start of its counteroffensive on the 21st of January 1942. Rommel's forces continued to be plagued by fuel shortages throughout their campaign, a fact exacerbated by the British destruction of Allied fuel stores at every opportunity as they retreated under pressure of the Africa Korps.

One of the physical factors present in the Soviet Army in early 1943 was the serious shortcoming of cooordination and securing of supplies. Liddell Hart points out in his analysis of the Red Army that collection and transport of Soviet supplies were directed by one authority. In August 1941, Stalin created the position of Chief of the Rearward Area of the Red Army to concentrate all military supply activities under a single authority.[45] During the winter fighting of 1942-1943, however, when the Soviet Army made lengthy advances, soldiers "lived for weeks and months on unthreshed grain and horsemeat, and the horses themselves on roof thatching."[46] The Soviets were experiencing serious problems prior to the Donbas offensive. Colonel Glantz points out, "German destruction of towns, rails, and bridges forced the Soviets to keep supply installations 250-300 kilometers from the front."(59) Destruction of the Soviet rail system also forced the Soviets to rely on auto and horse transport. The Soviets were already critically short of motor transport vehicles. Intermittant thaws exacerbated the already tenuous supply situation by turning portions of the countryside into quagmires, bogging down all means of transport.

Another physical factor present prior to the Donbas offensive was the strength and condition of the Soviet forces. Mobile units were below fifty percent of their authorized strength. Divisions in 1st Guards Army, 6th Army, 3d Guards Army, and 5th Tank Army had been in almost continuous combat since the middle of December. More important, "high casualties in earlier operations meant that many of the soldiers in these

units were new and relatively untrained."[48] Soviet troops were exhausted from continuous combat; in many cases, they were undertrained and underfed. A critical failure on the part of the STAVKA and front commanders was that they overlooked the condition of their troops.

Moral factors affecting the Soviet culminating point were equally important as the physical factors. Probably the most significant of these was the optimism and overconfidence displayed by the STAVKA, front commanders and their staffs prior to and throughout most of the Donbas offensive. This optimism, bred in part by the fall of Stalingrad and the destruction of the Italian 8th and Hungarian 2d Armies, caused the Soviets to underestimate the capabilities of the Germans, to misunderstand German intentions, and to overestimate the capabilities of their own forces. Overconfidence of the STAVKA and front commanders resulted in issuance of unrealistic directives, which in turn caused heavy Soviet casualties and the loss of about thirty percent of the gains their forces had made in the winter of 1943.[49] STAVKA and front staffs often misinterpreted the intelligence collected on German dispositions and movements, despite repeated warnings to the contrary from division and army commanders. On 21 February, Lieutenant General A.N. Bogolyubov, the operations officer in STAVKA, said, "We have exact data that the enemy in the evening is withdrawing in dense columns from the Donbas." As Glantz indicates, though, "these dense columns were about to participate in a violent counterattack."[50]

In his discussion of the culminating point of victory, Clausewitz addresses several factors which affect the loss of strength of an attacking force. He states, "The distance from the sources that must send continual replacements for this steadily weakening army, will increase proportionately with the advance."[51] Such was the case when British forces pursued Rommel's Afrika Korps across Cyrenaica during Operation "Crusader." Rommel's subsequent counteroffensive in January 1942 was afflicted by the same malady--lack of replacements in both personnel and equipment, overextended supply lines, and a continued weakening of existing forces. Pitt uses a comment by General von Senger to summarize the Soviet Donbas operation: "During the two months after the battle of Stalingrad, the Russians pursued the defeated German troops uninterruptedly along a 750 mile front, which in the south attained a depth of 435 miles. The pursuit slowly but surely ground to a halt. The Russian spearheads became thinner and thinner. Assault units continued to the limit of their endurance and beyond the point were they could be resupplied. This extension and weakening of the Russian lines...explains why units with limited combat strength...were able...to recover, halt the enemy, and then throw him back..."[52]

Another factor that merits attention is how the Soviets were organized to fight. Both the Southwest Front and the Voronezh Front to its north deployed all their armies on line with virtually no second echelon or reserve forces. In addition, the STAVKA had no armies in reserve that could have been used to

strengthen the attack. As a result, the Soviets were unable to concentrate their forces during the attack, and were incapable of filling gaps between the divergent attack axes of 1st Guards Army and 6th Army.

FM 100-5 also identifies several factors that may cause an operational offensive to reach a culminating point: "The forward movement of supplies may be insufficiently organized or may lack needed transport; the attacking force may have suffered combat losses to tip the balance of forces; or the soldiers of the attacking army may become physically exhausted and morally less committed as the attack progresses."[53] The physical exhaustion of Rommel's troops was certainly a major factor in his campaign, a factor which Rommel could be criticized for overlooking. Although Rommel's forces were generally better trained and more acclimated to fighting in the desert than their British adversaries, they nonetheless were required to fight beyond the moral bounds of physical exhaustion. One of the most dramatic examples of combat weary troops occurred on 14 June, when Rommel's two panzer divisions (15th and 21st) had outflanked major elements of the XIII Corps retreating from their Gazala positions to Tobruk. Pitt described the situation as follows: "By nightfall, the Germans were...on the Escarpment...the entire British and South African defense line had been outflanked, the Via Balbia was just below and well within sight and striking distance, and the escape of all other Allied troops still between Gazala and the Afrika Korps apparently cut off. But even Afrika Korps flesh and blood could only stand so much. 'That night the

exhausted crews of the Panzer Divisions lay in the desert outside Acroma, with nothing between them and the crowded Via Balbia, but they did not stir for all the urgent signals of their Commander-in-Chief, who saw clearly enough that the prize of the Gazala garrison was slipping out of his grasp....' While the Afrika Korps slept, XIII Corps escaped."[54]

Role of Commander and Staff

Tactical and operational commanders and their principal staff officers play a significant role in identifying the various factors associated with the concept of "culminating point." The culmination of Rommel's 1942 counteroffensive across North Africa was principally a product of strategic decisions which resulted in an insufficient amount of resources for Rommel's campaign. Despite his brilliant leadership and tactics, Rommel ignored, or at least grossly overestimated the capabilities of his troops. Relentless in his pursuit of Eighth Army forces, he pushed his combat weary troops to the limits of physical endurance. At times, he pushed so hard that his staff was incapable of functioning. As Barrie Pitt has described, "On the morning of 29 June, as Rommel hustled his exhausted men on again without rest--without even, as 90th Light war diary sorrowfully records, 'a swim in the sea,' or a chance to 'sleep its fill after the heavy fighting for Mersa Matruh and all the hardships of the previous days'--his staff were unable to supply him with a very accurate picture of what lay ahead in the El Alamein defenses."[55] General Vatutin, commander of the Soviet Southwest

Front, likewise overestimated the capabilities of his own troops. The optimism and overconfidence exhibited by himself, STAVKA, and his own staff caused decisions to be made that resulted in unnecessary Soviet losses and casualties.

The role of the intelligence officer and staff is particularly relevant as a factor in determining the culminating point of the enemy. When Rommel launched his surprise counteroffensive in North Africa on 21 January 1942, his chief of intelligence, Major F.W. Mellenthin, predicted, "at least for the next two weeks, Panzergruppe forces in the area would be more powerful and much better supplied--that is, in much better shape for battle--than the British forces facing them, and that now would be the best time to attack."[56] Rommel received intelligence from radio intercepts that indicated the British "were experiencing cruel supply difficulties."[57] He also knew that the British supply line then extended over 1,000 miles, while he was now only 500 miles from Tripoli.

British intelligence provided Auchinleck with an assessment (although inaccurate) of those factors associated with Rommel's culminating point. Auchinleck communicated to Prime Minister Churchill on 12 January 1942 that Rommel's divisions were in name only: the strength of the 90th German light division, originally 9,000," [is] now 3,500, and has only one field gun left." He also addressed the fact that the Germans were "disorganized, short of senior officers, short of material, and tired" due to the continuous pressure. Information gained from German prisoners of war indicated German morale was low and losses in

recent fighting high. Prisoners also attested to growing dissatisfaction with Rommel's leadership within German ranks.[58]

A variety of intelligence sources provided Manstein with valuable information on enemy strengths and intentions. Intelligence estimates of the German Army Group were based upon information provided by communication intercepts, air reconnaissance, interrogation of prisoners of war, captured documents, and agents located behind enemy lines. General Blumroeder, one of Manstein's general staff officers, stated "Field Marshall von Manstein accepted the work of the G-2 service completely and used it as a basis for his operational decisions."[59]

General Vatutin, commander of the Soviet Southwest Front, however, allowed his optimism and overconfidence to color the intelligence provided him by his division and army commanders. Despite repeated warnings from his commanders that troop fatigue, equipment shortages, and growing enemy strength made it impossible to conduct simultaneous attacks in all sectors of the front, he insisted on pressing the attack to encircle and destroy the entire German Donbas Group.

Operations officers and their staffs also play key roles with regard to identifying culminating points. In conjunction with the intelligence staff, a correlation of forces is developed which, in part, affects the organization and structure of the friendly forces. General Vatutin disregarded the condition of his troops and structured his front with all of his armies on line with all of the divisions in a single echelon leaving no

capability to strengthen the attack at a given time. An accurate status of personnel, weapons systems, equipment, supplies, and replacements is needed for both friendly and enemy forces.

The role of the logistician is probably more easily identified with the concept of culminating point than those of intelligence and operations officers. FM 100-5 cites a number of logistics-related reasons that cause operational offensives to reach a culminating point: the forward movement of supplies may be insufficiently organized or may lack neeeded transport; available stocks may be exhausted; or requirements to protect lines of communication may reduce the strength of forward forces. Operational offensives often reached culminating points prior to achieving their objectives because "planners were not able to forecast adequately the drain on resources of extended fighting at great depths."[60] Certainly the Soviets experienced considerable difficulties in resupplying their armored spearheads during the Donbas operation on the eastern front in the winter of 1942-1943. Rommel likewise was inadequately resourced for his operational campaign in North Africa. The logistician must be capable of accurately predicting friendly support/supply requirements, in conjuction with the effects caused by combat losses, time-distance factors, status of lines of communication, weather and terrain, and repair and replacement capabilities. With the assistance of the intelligence officer, he can provide valuable information for targeting critical threat logistics assets that may cause an enemy offensive to reach a culminating point prior to reaching its objective.

Section V

Conclusions

In conclusion, it appears that Clausewitz's concept of the culminating point is not some outdated or irrelevant theory, but is a viable concept key to the design and conduct of campaigns and major operations. The concept of culminating point must be considered by tactical and operational commanders and planners as an important ingredient in the campaign planning process. The role of these commanders and planners in identifying various factors affecting the culminating point is just as valuable today as it was during World War II. FM 100-5 states that strategic, operational, and tactical offensives often culminated early because "planners were not able to adequately forecast the drain on resources of extended fighting at great depths."[61] Principal staff officers have a key role to play in identifying the various factors which cause either a friendly or enemy force to reach its culminating point. They need to be attentive to the effects of weather and terrain on friendly and enemy courses of action, time-distance factors, and protection and useability of lines of communication. Planners must be proactive in their thinking; they must identify those actions that, when taken, cause an increase in the rate at which an enemy attack reaches it's culminating point. Such actions may include retention of a key piece of terrain, as in the German defense of Slavyansk in the Donbas region; an interdiction campaign against lines of

communication or key logistics facilities; or interdiction of specific support units or capabilities.

The Clausewitzian concept of the culminating point is a key ingredient to successful prosecution of AirLand Battle doctrine. The object of U.S. Army operations is to secure or retain the initiative and to impose our will on the enemy in order to achieve our purpose. We accomplish this by taking those actions which, in concert with our campaign plan, cause the enemy to do something which facilitates the accomplishment of our objective.

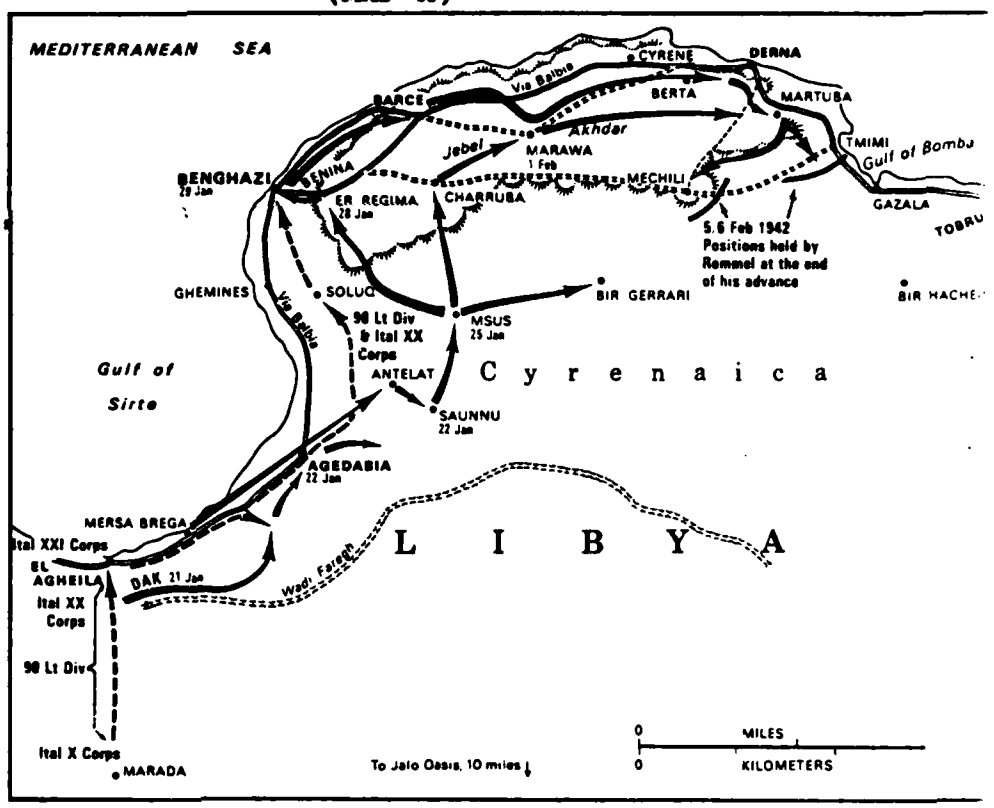
Political constraints imposed by the NATO alliance make it doubtful that we will fight future campaigns on European battlefields with similar depths as the two World War II operations studied in this paper. This may be true with respect to threat forces fought in the close-in battle, but not with respect to threat forces fought in the deep battle. It is in this context that operational planners should consider those factors which will affect the enemy's culminating point. Commanders and planners must also be sensitive to those factors which affect the culminating point of friendly forces.

In conclusion, Clausewitz's concept of culminating point is not some irrelevant theory, but a viable part of the planning process at the operational level, key to the design and conduct of campaigns and major operations.

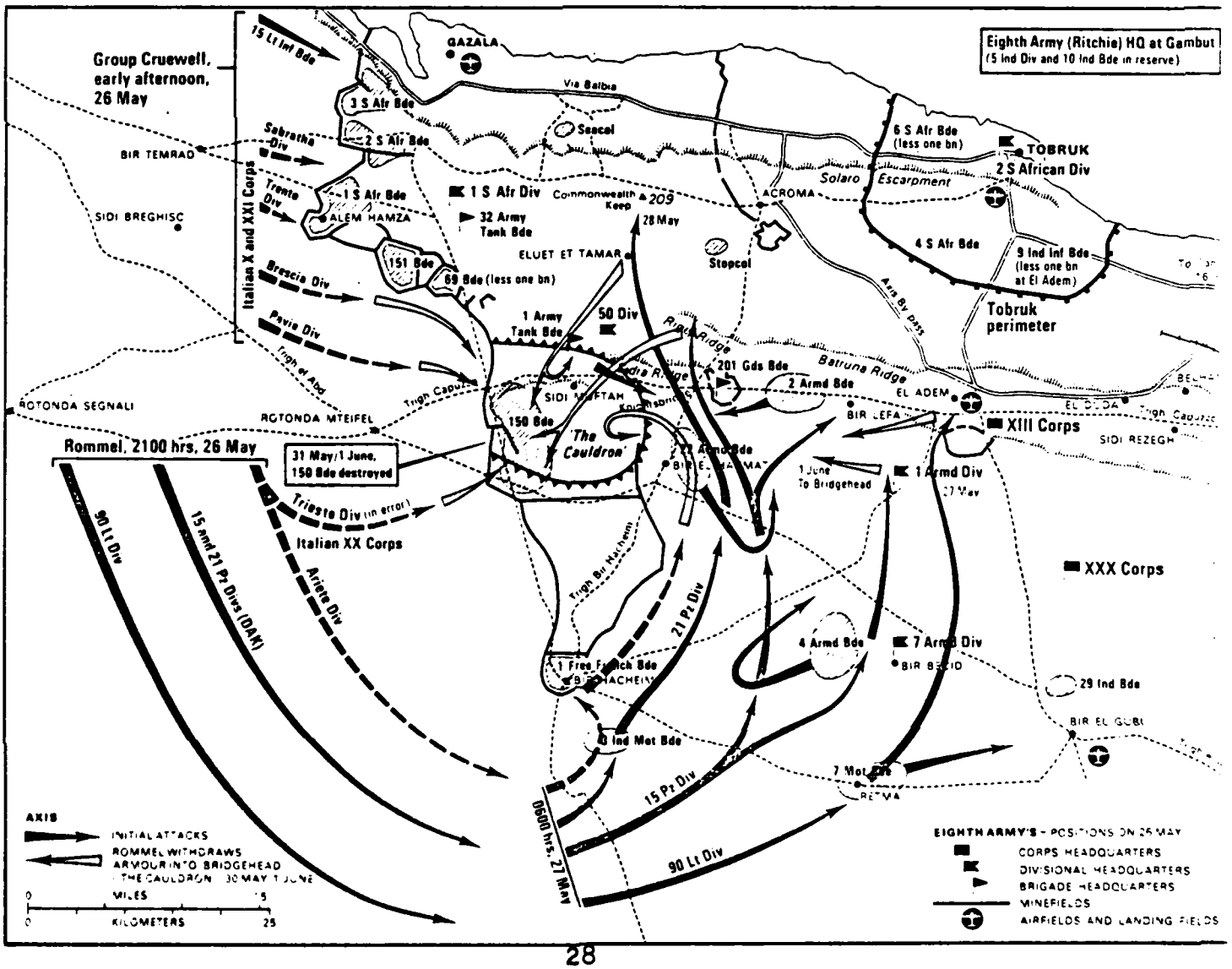
The German Drive on Gazala

Extracted from Richard
atkiel's Atlas of World War II,
ison Books Corp. 1985, p. 46.

(MAP A)



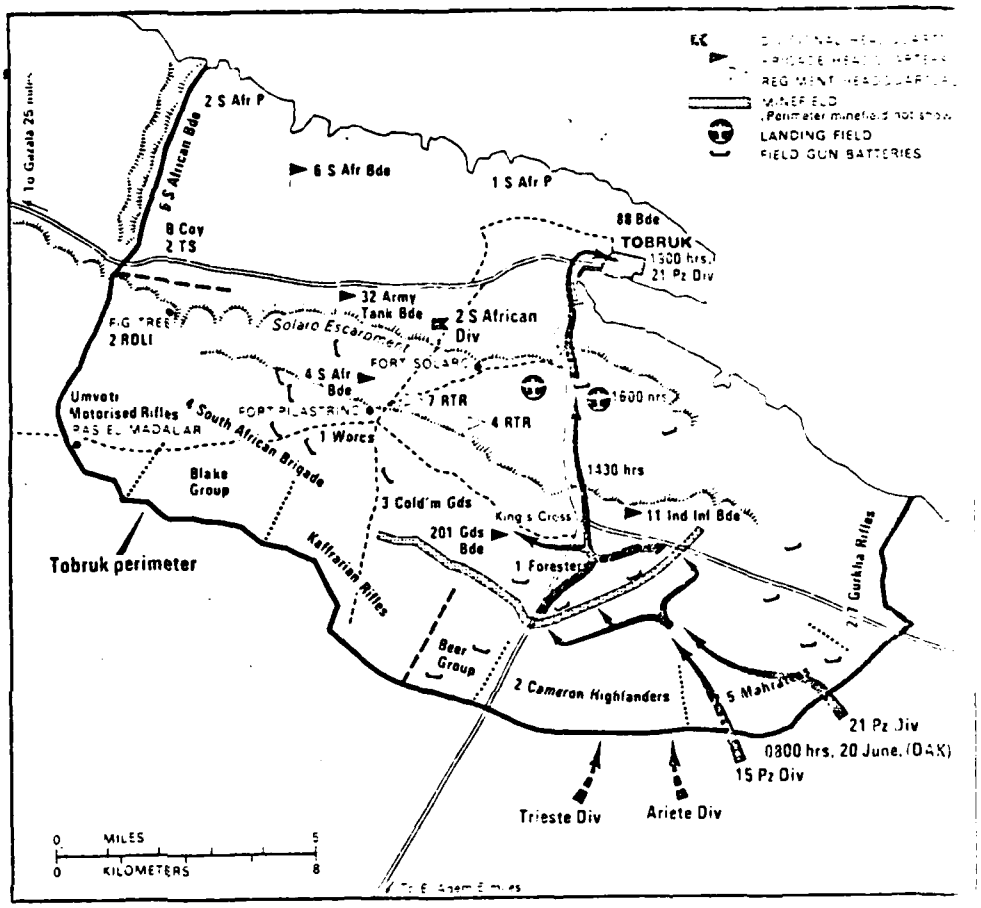
(MAP B)



The Fall of Tobruk

(MAP C)

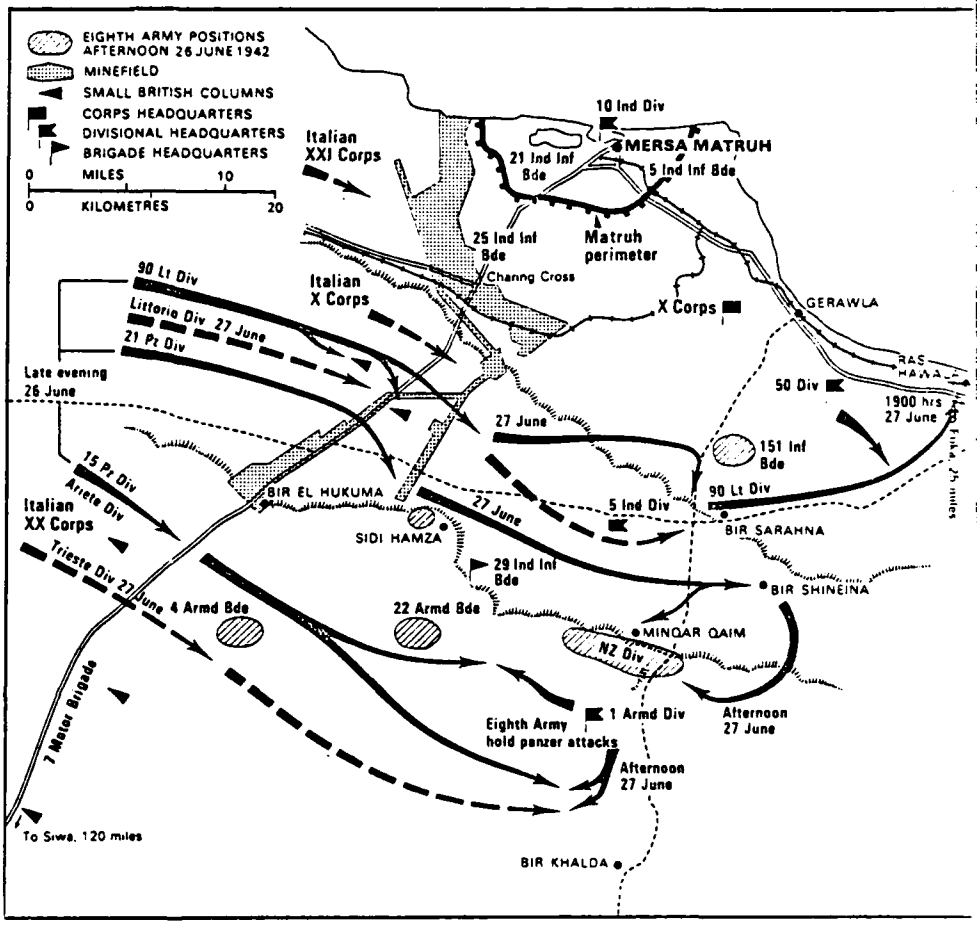
Extracted from Richard Natkiel's Atlas of World War II, Bison Books Corps, 1985, p. 48.



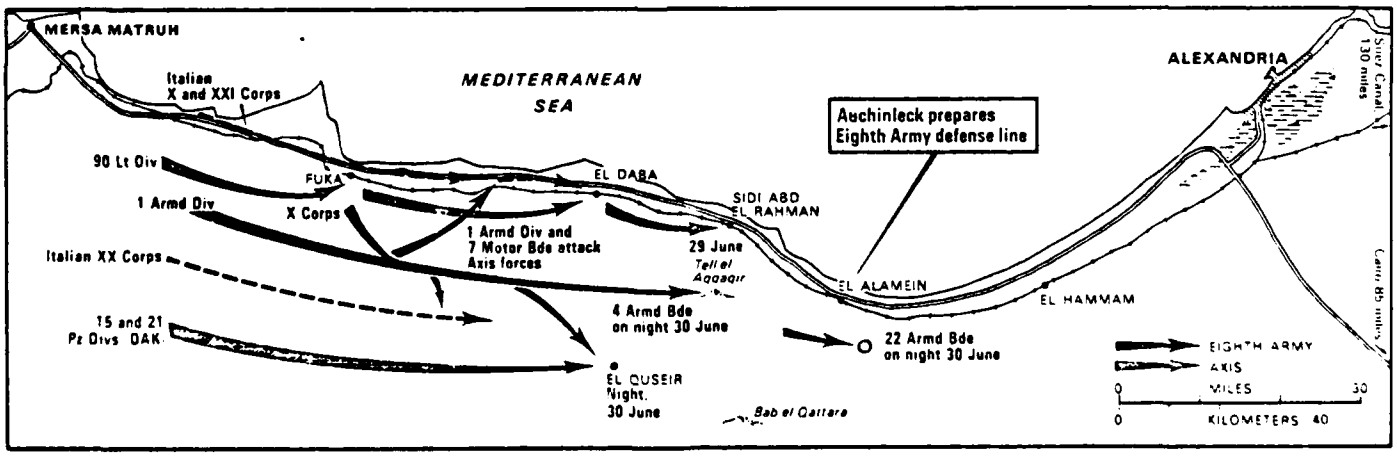
El Alamein: The First Battle

Extracted from Richard
atkiel's Atlas of World War II,
ison Books Corps, 1985, p. 54.

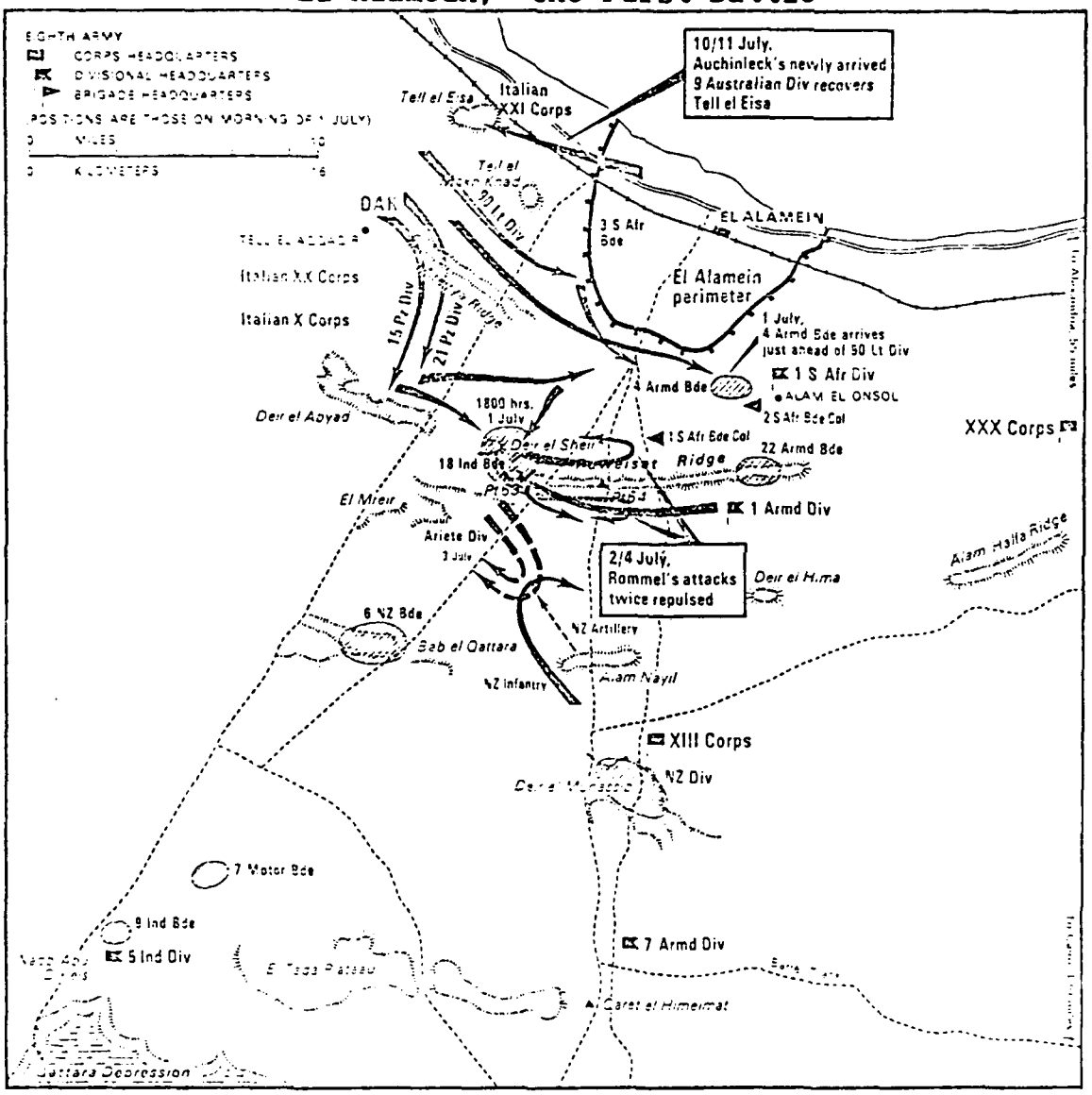
(MAP D)



(MAP E)



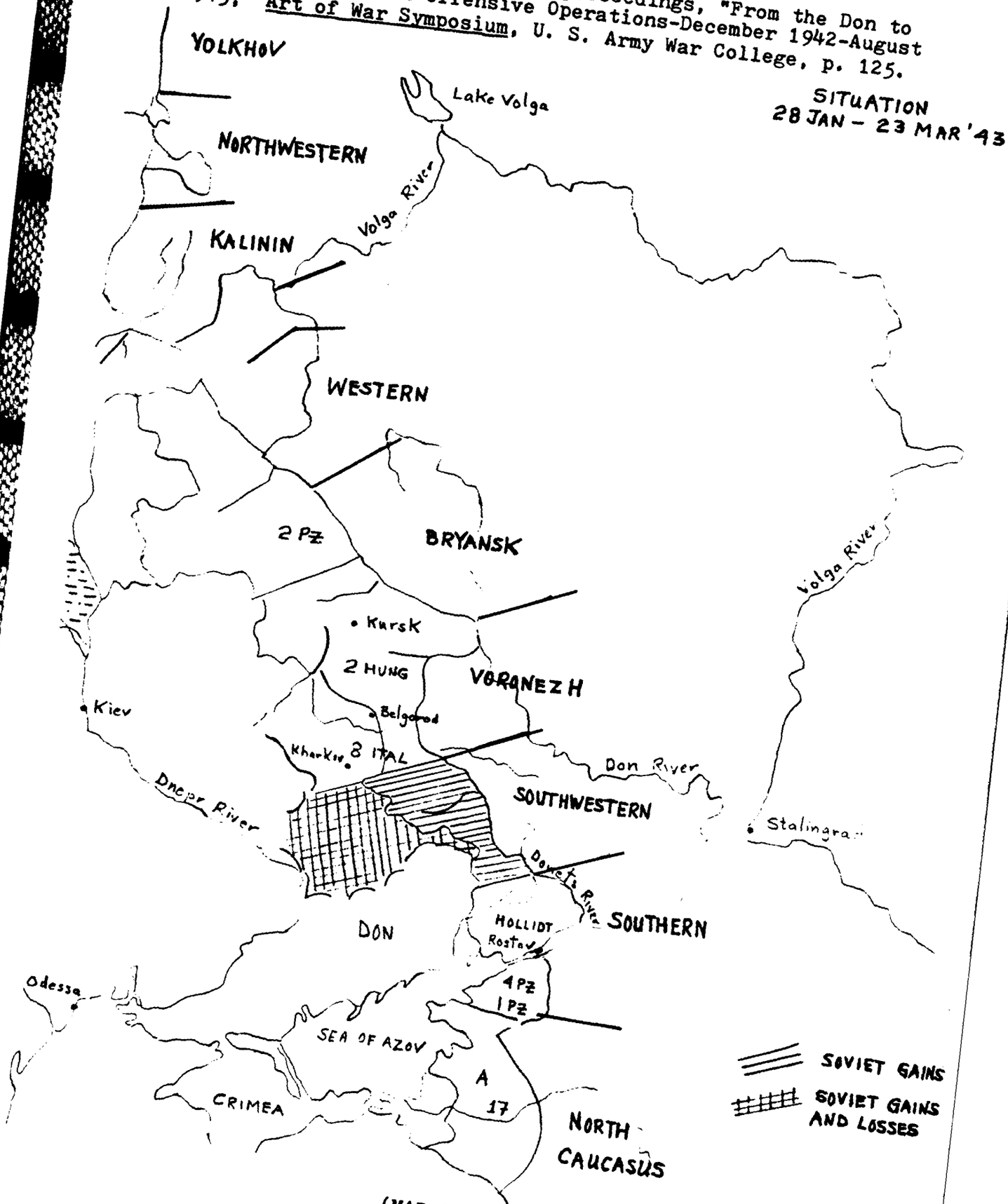
El Alamein; The First Battle



(MAP F)

Extracted from Richard Natkiel's Atlas of World War II, Bison Books Corps, 1985, p. 55.

Extracted from a transcript of proceedings, "From the Don to the Dneper: Soviet Offensive Operations-December 1942-August 1943," Art of War Symposium, U. S. Army War College, p. 125.



(MAP G)

(MAP H)

WINTER OFFENSIVE PLAN FEB 43

Extracted from a transcript of proceedings, "From the Don to the Dnepr: Soviet Offensive Operations December 1942-August 1943," "Art of War Symposium, U.S. Army War College, p. 124.

CORRELATION OF FORCES

Donbas Operation - 29 January 1942

SOVIET		GERMAN	
Southwestern Front			
6th Army	40,000 men	A. Abt. Lanz	20,000 men
	40 tanks		
		1st Panzer Army	40,000 men
1st Guards Army	70,000 men		40 tanks
Mobile Group Popov	55,000 men		
	212 tanks	A. Abt. Hollidt	100,000 men
3d Guards Army	100,000 men		60 tanks
	110 tanks		
5th Tank Army	40,000 men		
Reserves	20,000 men		
Total Strength	325,000 men*	2 x 1	160,000 men**
	362 tanks	4 x 1	100 tanks(est)

*Reinforced by 300 tanks of 1st Guards and 25th Tank Corps.

**Reinforced by two divisions of SS Panzer Corps with approximately 250 tanks.

EXTRACTED from the transcript of proceedings, "From the Don to the Dnepr: Soviet Offensive Operations--December 1942-August 1943." Art of War Symposium, U.S. Army War College, p. 129.

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3. U.S. Army, Operations (Prepublication Edition, FM 100-5 (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1986), p.3-8.

4. Field Manual 100-5 (Prepublication Edition), p. C-3.

5. Barrie Pitt, The Crucible of War, Western Desert 1941 (London: Jonathan Cape, 1980), p. 461.

6. Pitt, pp. 7-8.

7. Correlli Barnett, The Desert Generals (New York: Ballantine Books, Inc., 1960), p. 126.

8. Barnett, p. 127.

9. Erwin Rommel, The Rommel Papers (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1953), p. 180.

10. Kenneth J. Macksey, Afrika Korps (New York: Ballantine Books, Inc., 1968), p. 61.

11. Pitt, p. 8.

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14. Rommel, p. 181.

15. James Lucas, Panzer Army Africa (San Rafael, California & London, England: Presidion Press, 1977), p. 91.

16. David Irving, The Trail of the Fox (New York: E.P. Dutton, Inc., 1977), p. 189.

17. Macksey, p. 67.

18. Rommel, p. 192.

19. Pitt, p. 29.

20. Pitt, p. 28.

21. Pitt, p. 29.

22. Lucas, p. 95.

23. Pitt, p.46.

24. Pitt, p. 116.

25. Pitt, p. 130.

26. Pitt, p. 139.

27. Pitt, p. 142.

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29. David M. Glantz, From the Don to the Dnepr: A Study of Soviet Offensive Operations, Dec 1942-Aug 1943 (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, undtd), p. 101.

30. Glantz, p. 104.

31. U.S. Army War College, 1984 Art of War Symposium--From the Don to the Dnepr: Soviet Offensive Operations--December 1942-August 1943 (Carlisle, Pennsylvania, Center for Land Warfare, 1984, p. 126.

32. Glantz, p. 107.

33. U.S. Army War College, p. 127.

34. Erich von Manstein, Lost Victories (Novato, California: Presidio Press, 1982), p. 410.

35. Manstein, p. 410.

36. U.S. Army War College, p. 127.

37. Glantz, p. 121.

38. U.S. Army War College, p. 144.

39. Glantz, p. 129.

40. Glantz, p. 138.

41. Glantz, p. 142.

42. Glantz, p. 140.

43. Glantz, p. 142.

44. Clausewitz, p. 528.

45. B.H. Liddell Hart, The Red Army (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1956), p. 277.

46. Hart, p. 276.

47. Glantz, p. 166.

48. Glantz, p. 165.

49. Glantz, p. 165.

50. Glantz, p. 143.

51. Clausewitz, p. 569.

52. Pitt, p. 170.

53. Field Manual 100-5 (Prepublication Edition), p. C-4.

54. Pitt, pp. 86-87.

55. Pitt, p. 130.

56. Pitt, p. 7.

57. Irving, p. 185.

58. Pitt, pp. 8-9.

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