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OPERATIONAL DECEPTION: WHEN THE WEB IS WORTH THE SPINNING


by

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The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.
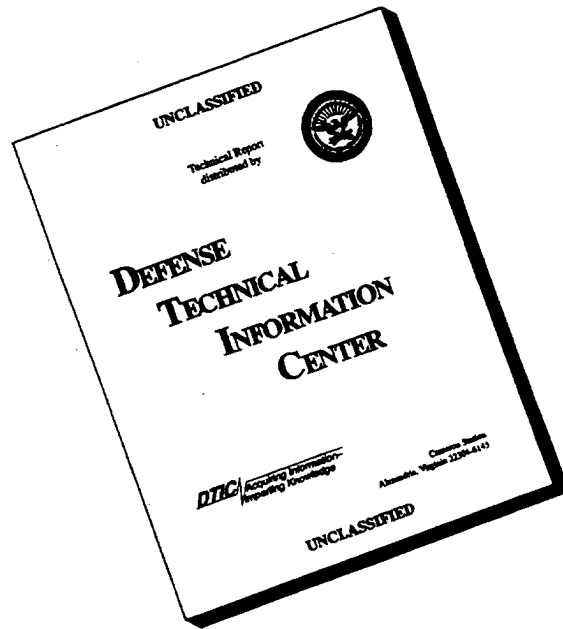

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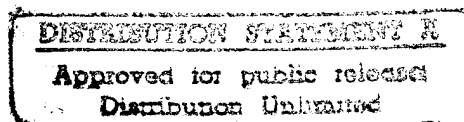
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15. Abstract: As an operational planner, it is important to understand the tools available to plan and execute successful military operations. One such tool is deception. It can affect the application of several of the principles of war: Surprise, Maneuver, Mass, Economy of Force, and Security. This paper examines precepts of deception which may be useful in determining when deception operations may best be undertaken. Unity of effort, plausibility and preconceptions, control of intelligence and consideration of time are all examined in the context of an historical case study. The Battle of Kursk provides the historical case for examination. It is particularly useful because it is one of the rare occasions in which both sides executed deception operations. In what would be the largest tank battle ever fought, the German deception failed and along with it their last major offensive in the East. The Soviet deception was successful and allowed them to stop the Germans, seize the initiative and begin the counterattack which would lead to the Germans' ultimate defeat. Analysis shows that the Germans failed integrate their deception into the overall plan, present a believable alternative to their true intentions, manipulate Soviet intelligence systems, or use time to their advantage. Soviet deception, on the other hand, was successful in each of these areas which significantly improved their chances of success. The operational planner can take these precepts and weigh them against the prospect of future operations to determine if deception is a reasonable course of action. If the coditions are not met, then the web of deception may not be worth spinning.

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OPERATIONAL DECEPTION: WHEN THE WEB IS WORTH THE SPINNING

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The Battle of Kursk provides the historical case for examination. It is particularly useful because it is one of the rare occasions in which both sides executed deception operations. In what would be the largest tank battle ever fought, the German deception failed and along with it their last major offensive in the East. The Soviet deception was successful and allowed them to stop the Germans, seize the initiative and begin the counterattack which would lead to the Germans' ultimate defeat.

Analysis shows that the Germans failed integrate their deception into the overall plan, present a believable alternative to their true intentions, manipulate Soviet intelligence systems, or use time to their advantage. Soviet deception, on the other hand, was successful in each of these areas which significantly improved their chances of success.

The operational planner can take these precepts and weigh them against the prospect of future operations to determine if deception is a reasonable course of action. If the conditions are not met, then the web of deception may not be worth spinning.

Oh what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive.
--Sir Walter Scott

INTRODUCTION

What is deception and why do I care? As an operational planner, knowing the answer

to this question may mean the difference between success and failure on the battlefield or at

least produce significant cost reductions in losses of both personnel and equipment. In the

context of the principles of war, deception can be critical to Surprise, but it can also enhance

Maneuver, Mass, Economy of Force and Security. Having such broad application, deception

can play a potentially decisive role in the support of successful military operations. It is

important, therefore, that the operational planner have an understanding of deception and its

application and integration for the benefit of broader military operations. To accomplish this,

this essay will present a definition of deception and some precepts for its use, followed by a

case study to examine these precepts and some conclusions to assist the operational planner in

determining when 'the web is worth the spinning.'

An understanding of deception begins with definition. Professor Michael I. Handel

says, "In a nutshell, deception may be defined as: The process of influencing the enemy to

make decisions disadvantageous to himself by supplying or denying information."[1] Joint

Pub 3-0 describes it as:

> ...focused on causing the opponents to act in a desired manner, not simply to be
> misled in their thinking. The purpose is to cause opposing commanders to form
> inaccurate impressions about friendly force capabilities or intentions, misappropriate
> their intelligence collection assets, or fail to employ combat or support units to their
> best advantage.[2]

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[1]   Michael I. Handel, ed., Strategic and Operational Deception in the Second World
War, (London: Frank Cass and Company, 1987), 1.

[2]   U. S. Joint Staff, Doctrine for Joint Operations. Joint Pub 3-0, (Washington: 1995),
III-31.

Professor Handel describes the action by the deceiver, while the Joint Pub lays out the endstate--incorrect action by the opposing forces. It is both a cause and effect, not only misleading an opponent, but inducing incorrect reactions. Being fooled is not enough; forcing an incorrect reaction is the real essence of deception.

Deception has been described as one of the few means available to the operational commander to shape the battlefield prior to the actual joining of forces.[3] But certain conditions must exist to make deception operations worth the effort. The deception effort must be a constituent part of the operation, not a side show. The misdirection, or false course of action, must be believable to the enemy--even better if it can play on prejudices of the opposition. Friendly capability must include some ability to limit or control enemy intelligence collection. Time must be considered--is there enough or too much. These factors can be used by the operational planner to evaluate when it might be appropriate to plan deception operations. If the above conditions do not exist, it may be counterproductive to plan and execute deception operations.

CASE STUDY

The Battle of Kursk, fought between German and Soviet forces on the Eastern Front is a good case for examination of deception operations. It provides the somewhat unique situation in which both sides actually planned and conducted deception operations in support of their broader combat operations. Consequently it offers a rare case for examination. Both successful and unsuccessful deception operations are portrayed in a single operational context.

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[3] Douglas V. Smith, Military Deception and Operational Art, (Newport, RI: Center for Naval Warfare Studies 1993), 2.

By the spring of 1943, the situation on the Eastern Front had become relatively stable. The front stretched in a line from the vicinity of Leningrad in the north to the vicinity of Rostov on the Sea of Azov in the south. This line was relatively straight, with the exception of a large salient west of Kursk. It extended about 100 kilometers deep into German territory and was roughly 200 kilometers wide. The salient's shoulders were based near Orel in the north and Belgorod in the south; held by the German's Army Group Center around Orel and Army Group South around Belgorod. Inside the salient the Soviet's Central Front held the northern portion, while the southern was held by the Voronezh Front (see map at figure 1). Both sides faced a major decision concerning the appropriate strategy for the summer of 1943. Attack first, or defend and follow with a counterattack; the debate filled the inner councils both in Berlin and in Moscow. Ultimately, the Germans chose the former and the Soviets the latter. On 5 July, the Germans launched a huge two-pronged attack against the flanks of the Kursk salient in what was to become the largest armor battle ever fought, and the turning point of the war in the East.

The Germans planned their summer offensive, Operation Citadel, to cut off the Kursk salient, surround and destroy the Soviet armies inside the salient, thereby straightening their lines and shortening them by approximately 240 kilometers. The intent of the operation was to, "...encircle enemy forces deployed in the Kursk area by means of an extremely concentrated thrust conducted mercilessly and swiftly by one assault army each from the areas of Belgorod and south of Orel, to annihilate the enemy in a concentric attack."[4] They planned to accomplish this by concentrating large forces, including their best and newest tanks and

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[4] Janusz Piekalkiewicz, <u>Operation Citadel</u> (Novato, CA: Presidio Press 1987), 42.

equipment, on narrow axes of attack from the north and south with 22 divisions and 18 divisions respectively. By operating on narrow fronts and moving rapidly across the salient, they hoped to replay their successes of previous years and exploit the Soviet's weaknesses in defense seen in previous campaigns. One of the key elements to success was expected to be the technological superiority of the new equipment being fielded. Fielding of these new Tiger and Panther tanks and the Ferdinand assault guns, however, caused the delay of the offensive several times pushing it from early May all the way into July.

The Germans planned to use extensive deception operations to mask the true intent and location of their upcoming operation. In Operation Order Number 6 (directing the execution of Operation Citadel) the deception intent and measures were outlined: "It is crucial to maintain the element of surprise as much as possible, and above all to keep the enemy in the dark as to the timing of the offensive."[5] And further, "...to deceive the enemy, preparations for 'Panther'[a dummy drive to the Caucasus] will continue in the area of Army Group South...supported by every means (conspicuous reconnaissance, show of tanks, preparation of crossing materials, radios, agents, spreading rumors, employment of the Luftwaffe, etc.) and kept going as long as possible...everything must be done to confuse the enemy's picture of the situation...."[6] This direction came from the supreme Headquarters, but actual planning and implementation was left to individual commanders. They used false radio communications to indicate false units in the field; camouflage to conceal actual troop

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[5]   ibid.

[6]   ibid., p. 43.

concentrations. Movements were limited to hours of low visibility. And efforts were made to give the impression of an impending operation (Panther) to the south.

The Soviets planned a defensive-offensive that would first allow the German forces to break themselves on the strong defensive works in the salient, then counterattack to exploit the weakness of these depleted forces. A cornerstone of this plan was the deception operation, which would permit the necessary build up of forces for a sufficient stopping force as well as the counterattack force. They built incredibly strong defensive belts on the shoulders of the salient including over 8,500 kilometers of trenches and 500,000 mines[7]. Additionally, they marshaled a huge counterattack force outside the salient; the Steppe Front consisting of five full armies. Once the German advance was blunted, this force was to form the nucleus of the counterattack to destroy the extended and weakened German columns and continue the drive to roll back the German positions on the flanks of the salient.

To orchestrate this elaborate scheme, the Soviets planned and executed extensive deception operations. With the exception of certain defensive preparations that they wanted the Germans to see, all the defensive construction was done at night and/or under complicated camouflage. "All our soldiers became engineers. We dug hundreds of kilometers of trenchlines...built cover for tanks, guns, motor vehicles...everything was adapted to the terrain to such an extent that ground and air reconnaissance could recognize little."[8] All radio communication by units moving into the area was prohibited; acknowledgment of messages was by wire only. Special signal units were formed to perform, for the first time, electronic

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[7]   Alexander Tsirlin, "Engineers in the Battle" in The Battle of Kursk. ed. Ivan Parotkin (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), 218-220.

[8]   Piekalkiewicz, 76.

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warfare functions: radio deception, radio reconnaissance, direction and position finding, jamming, and special signal interception. Special deception units were designated to build numerous decoy facilities to include over 40 dummy airfields and 800 armored assembly areas. Troop movements were conducted only at night or during poor weather conditions when Luftwaffe reconnaissance aircraft could not detect the movements. Simulated radio nets and command/communications centers were set up to reinforce the desired impression of troop dispositions in purely defensive dispositions. Marshal Konev, commander of the Steppe Front wrote after the battle:

> Did the enemy know about the organization of a firm defense in the rear of our fronts?
> He knew. And that played a positive role. The enemy thought we were preparing
> only for a defensive battle...The main thing was not to conceal the fact of our
> preparation, but rather the force and means, the concept of battle the time of our
> counteroffensive and the nature of our defenses.[9]

The battle was scheduled to begin at 0330 hours on 5 July, preceded by a short duration artillery barrage. Failure of the Germans to achieve the desired surprise, however, resulted in the Soviets launching a preemptive artillery attack that disrupted and delayed the attack from the very outset. By the second day of the offensive, the failure of their deception was evident. In the war diary of the High Command of the Armed Forces (OKW) the entry for 6 July states, "in Operation Citadel the Southern Group gained eighteen kilometers and the Northern Group ten kilometers in distance. The enemy knew the time when the attack was scheduled. Therefore, no operational surprise was achieved."[10] This was a very telling observation. Not only had the timing not been a surprise, but neither was the location nor the attack itself a surprise. The Soviets had anticipated the attack and were well prepared by the

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[9]   Robin Cross, Citadel: The Battle of Kursk (London: BCA Publishers 1993), 135.

[10]   Piekalkiewicz, 122.

time of execution. In the North, Army Group Center never gained much more than the ten kilometers reported above, and by 10 July was forced to transition to the defense, never approaching its operational objective. Although somewhat more successful, Army Group South was only able to gain about 30 kilometers in the drive towards Kursk. By 11 July, it had been forced to adjust its aims, shifting to force protection and enemy destruction. The fierce offensive drive originally conceived was finished. On 13 July the Soviet counterattacks began. By 20 July the Germans were in full retreat, by 23 July beyond their original starting points, and by 23 August the Soviet offensive had advanced to the point that a Kursk salient no longer existed.

ANALYSIS

The degree of integration of deception operations into the overall plans, and the level of execution of those operations clearly demonstrate the emphasis each side placed on their deception operations. It also predisposes that deception to success or failure. The German OKW gave some general guidance but then left coordination and execution to the subordinate commands. This did not provide adequate cooperation of the deception effort, nor integration into the overall plan. In addition, the inclusion of technological surprise, anticipated from the new equipment, was controlled directly from Berlin.

The Soviets fully integrated their deception and, in fact, built their operation around the successful execution of the deception plan. To accomplish this, three fronts, the Central, Voronezh, and Steppe, all had to be part of a well coordinated overall deception plan.[11] With such a significant group of forces, deception could not be left to individual commands with

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[11]   Cross, 133.

any real expectation of success. The deception, as well as the overall operation were coordinated and controlled at the highest level to ensure its unity of effort. Marshal Zhukov, Deputy Supreme Commander-in-Chief was placed in charge of coordinating all actions of the fronts in the vicinity of Kursk.

Misleading an opponent as to intentions, or causing him to focus on the wrong course of action are fundamental to effective deception. To mislead the enemy, the false course of action must be at least as reasonable as the true course being concealed. Prominent in the failure of German deception was the lack of a credible alternative. Although the Germans attempted to divert attention away from the Kursk salient using the fake 'Panther' operation, the Soviets were not fooled. Even before the Germans' final plans were made, the Soviets had ruled out other options as unreasonable, as shown by this message from the Chief of Staff of the Central Front on 10 April, 1943:

> Considering the present forces and resources and particularly the results of the 1941/1942 assault operations, an enemy offensive in spring/summer 1943 can only be expected in the operational direction of Kursk-Voronezh. An enemy offensive in other directions is hardly possible.[12]

It was clear that the Germans would conduct offensive operations. The obvious advantages of a limited offensive at Kursk made any other course of action seem improbable. Therefore, the Soviets focused on that area and discounted all the deception efforts pointing to other options. Although the Germans made an effort to mislead the Soviets, the effort was fruitless because it was not believable to the Soviets.

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[12] ibid., 40.

The Soviet deception, on the other hand, was effective in misleading the Germans. The Soviets had, to this point, had all of their success during the winters. It was therefore not surprising to the Germans that, "...the Red Army would lie dormant through the summer, biding its time, preparing for a major offensive in the winter."[13] This idea played right into the hands of the Soviet deception planners. German preconception was reinforced by the facts of Soviet defensive preparation. It also diverted attention away from the massing of huge counterattack forces behind the salient.

"Successful deception makes efficient intelligence collection by the victim counterproductive. For example, improved observational technology hurts the victim if he monitors routine indicators that the attacker is purposely manipulating in a nonroutine way."[14] The Germans were restricted in their ability to collect intelligence due to lack of reliable HUMINT sources, which forced an over reliance on the aerial reconnaissance capabilities of the Luftwaffe and SIGINT collection. The Soviets exploited this weakness by their extensive and skillful use of camouflage and signal deception. German sources reinforced the misinformation by interpreting this manipulated data just as the Soviets intended. Eventually, the Germans were able to discern the Soviets intentions and emplacements to some degree, but it was just too late to affect the operation.

Soviet intelligence was greatly superior to the Germans, both in means and in analysis. While the Germans were restricted in their collection capabilities, the Soviets had almost

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[13]   Martin Caidin, The Tigers Are Burning (New York: Hawthorn Books 1974), 84.

[14]   Richard K. Betts, Surprise Attack (Washington DC: Brookings Institute 1982), 108.

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unlimited means. There were thousands of partisans operating in the German's rear area to provide close HUMINT (over 18,000 partisans were operating in the Orel area alone)[15]. In addition, they had information from a spy network operating out of Switzerland ("Lucy")[16] and information filtered to them from the British, acquired from ULTRA (the Soviets were unaware of ULTRA until the 1970s). Beyond the advantages of superior human collection, they had rough parity with the Germans in aerial and signals intelligence. All this combined to give them a significantly enhanced capability to see through the German deception efforts.

Time is a balance to be weighed continually against the risks and gains it may provide. Too little time may interrupt the development of the deception, "although there may be occasions when [deception] can be usefully enlisted to give immediate aid, it is generally more correct to regard it as a method which achieves its results by slow and gradual process rather than by lightning strikes."[17] Conversely, too much time may spoil the ruse, "secrecy and speed are mutually dependent...if secrecy cannot be maintained speed must be increased."[18] Insufficient time may not allow the deception to develop while too much time may cause it to fall apart. The overall operation must have the flexibility to speed up execution in the event of failed or failing deception. Though the majority of the deception effort had failed, the Germans delayed rather than accelerated the attack, relying on the technological surprise to tip the balance. But the trade off in time was counterproductive since the technological

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[15]   Cross, 138.

[16]   Sources vary on the value of this connection.

[17]   Handel, 27.

[18]   Betts, 109.

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advantages gained were far less than the gains by the Soviets in defensive preparation. Time ceased to be an ally of the Germans when they failed to speed up the operation in spite of deteriorating surprise.

Because of the German delays, the Soviets gained time for their preparations and their deception. However, even for the Soviets, time finally shattered the web. By the end of June most of the German field commanders knew, if not in depth, at least in a general sense, the scope of the Soviet defenses. Even with the elaborate efforts to hide preparations, a ruse can only hold up for so long before it begins to break down. Deception can't survive prolonged exposure, unless the enemy's ability to collect intelligence is completely controlled.

CONCLUSIONS

The Soviets were successful in their deception and the Germans were not. Just as the Joint Pub 3-0 suggests, the Soviet deception caused the Germans to employ their forces at far less than their best advantage. Deception is useful for shaping the battlefield and provides a decided advantage to the side that can conduct successful deception operations. As an operational planner it is important to recognize when the conditions have been set to achieve success. There is a clear danger in conducting deception operations when an opponent cannot be deceived, as the Soviets were not deceived by the Germans.

Integrated deception is most effective. Deception is most effective when it is integrated into the overall plan and not a separate action . It must be an integral part of the operation, not an adjunct or an afterthought. The Germans left the execution to individual commanders and the result was disjointed and ineffective deception. The Soviets made their

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deception a central focus of the operation and succeeded in shaping the battlefield to their

advantage. Separating the deception effort from the main operation causes it to be

overlooked, or at least not to receive the emphasis it requires.

Credibility is crucial. For deception to be effective it must portray a believable course

of action. If the deceptive course of action is not plausible, the deception will fail, just as the

German deception at Kursk failed. However, a course of action becomes even more

believable if it reinforces a prejudice or preconception of the enemy, like the Soviet

reinforcement of the Germans expectation of defense. Deception works when the scheme is

believable and it is self-reinforcing if it sustains preconceived notions of the enemy.

Intelligence capabilities must be limited. Controlling an opponent's ability to collect

intelligence and manipulating what is collected significantly improves deception operations.

Limiting collection sources and controlling the data those sources can collect allows the

deceiver to control the picture an opponent sees of friendly activity. The Soviets did this to

the Germans, limiting them to aerial and signal reconnaissance, then distorting the data results

of those sources to paint a false picture of the situation.

Time is a fickle ally. It takes time to develop a viable deception scheme, but too much

time can cause the web to breakdown. Time cannot be sacrificed to complete any aspect of

deception at the expense of the overall operation. At the point that it becomes evident that

surprise is being compromised, time should be cut short. Especially if the lengthened time is

to enhance the deception, as with the Germans and their technological surprise

Deception is a valuable tool for the operational planner. All planners should be well

versed in the tools of their trade, particularly deception. It offers decided advantages for the

successful user, but perhaps more significantly it holds out greater potential disaster for the unsuccessful user. Deception is not be appropriate for every operation, and the planner should be prepared to evaluate and determine when the web is worth the spinning.

Without Deception?

Deception operations are often maligned as the poor man's solution to a lack of real strength to deal with an opponent. It is a common theme for the most powerful armies to say that deception isn't necessary because of the overwhelming power they have available to strike directly at the enemy. Although it is true that "...no matter how good intelligence and deception may be, they can never replace combat and material strength. All they can do is reduce the cost and make the fighting somewhat easier."[19] In fact, the cost in men and equipment may place all future operations in the balance. Without deception the Germans' situation would have been very much the same, because the deception failed. Without successful deception by the Soviets, however, the situation might have been widely different from what occurred. The Germans could have reversed the decision to attack first and fought a mobile defense until favorable counterattack opportunities existed. As events transpired, the Soviets still lost approximately 500-700,000 men and 3-4,000 tanks; without deception those numbers would certainly have been higher.
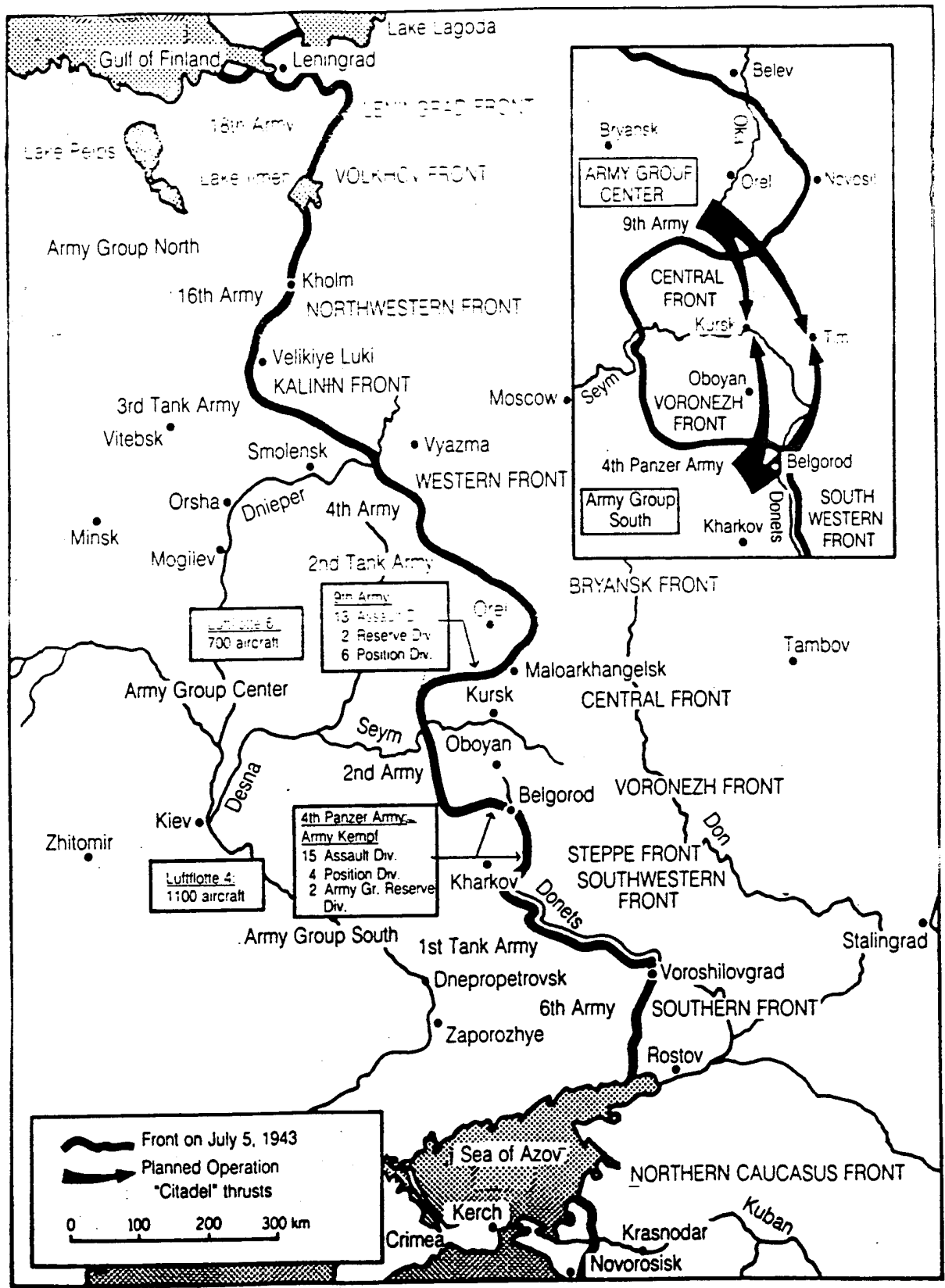
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[19] Handel, 22.

Figure 1.

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