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United States Marine Corps

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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

Battle of Kursk: The Operational Art and Principles of War

AUTHOR: Jerome Barbour

AY-10-11

Mentor and Oral Defense Committee Member: Richard L. DiNardo

Approved: [Signature]

Date: 1 April 2011

Oral Defense Committee Member: PAUL D. GROSS

Approved: [Signature]

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APPENDIX C

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APPENDIX C

Executive Summary

Title: The Battle of Kursk: The Operational Art and Principles of War.

Author: Major Jerome Barbour, United States Army

Thesis: Germany's inability to apply the principles of war at the battle of Kursk were the proximate cause of its defeat.

Discussion: The Soviet victory at the Battle of Kursk would have lasting effects on the outcome of World War II from both a strategic and operational point of view. Following the Soviet victory, operational initiative would permanently favor the Soviet Army due to Germany's inability to exercise offensive operations. The Battle of Stalingrad was a turning point for the Soviets in terms of a moral victory, but it had had little if any affect on Germany's ability to influence the outcome of the war from a decisive standpoint. Kursk on the other hand would decisively end Germany's ability to marshal its forces in a manner that enabled a decisive victory.

Conclusion: When looking at the fundamental principles of war, it is clear that the Soviets demonstrated a far greater grasp in application than that of the Hitler and his staff. From the operational planning, to the execution, the Soviet Army showed the ability to grow where as the Germans reverted or remained marred in doctrine of their past campaigns. The Russian showed more flexibility in adapting to German tactics than their counterparts. General Zhukov clearly understood the Russian Center of Gravity, whereas Hitler adhered to Nazi dogma and ideology. Zhukov not only developed an effective strategy but did so in a way that influenced Germany's operational center of gravity.

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The Soviet victory at Kursk had lasting effects on the outcome of World War II from both a strategic and operational point of view. Following the Soviet victory, operational initiative permanently favored the Red Army due to Germany's inability to conduct offensive operations. Although the Battle of Stalingrad was a turning point for the Soviet military, it had little effect on how Hitler viewed the state of affairs on the eastern front. Kursk on the other hand proved decisive for both parties involved. For this reason, we will look at how the events at Kursk unfolded, and why the Germans chose to attack a numerically superior force. We will examine how the principles of war affected the battle, and how the Soviet's ability to adapt its military practices changed both the landscape of Kursk and ultimately the war itself.¹

On 22 June 1941, Germany invaded Russia with what is still the largest operation in human history. Following the defeat of France and the evacuation of British soldiers from Dunkirk, the last standing obstacle to German dominance was the Soviet Army. Hitler saw war with Russia as inevitable. With the recommendation of his general staff he decided that invasion to the east was a more acceptable option in terms of combat power and time, than an invasion across the English Channel. Hitler and his generals believed that war with the Soviets would last no more than six months and the destruction of the Red Army would further lead to the neutralization of the British Empire.²

During the initial months of the invasion, Germany achieved countless victories but instead of concentrating its efforts against the Soviet capital of Moscow, Hitler spread his forces throughout Russia in an attempt to gain a total victory against the communist bolshevism. This decision led directly to Germany's inability to conquer Moscow and dashed out any hopes of a decisive victory. By 1943 Great Britain and the United States were making considerable progress

through Northern Africa and because of heavy Italian casualties, Mussolini began to make a strong argument to remove forces from the east in order to deal with threats closer to home.³

Furthermore, the Allied bombing campaign had reached the German home front, and its effects were beginning to be felt by the German people. Additionally the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht had reason to believe that a new Allied invasion would begin somewhere in the Mediterranean or across the English Channel. This would force Germany to split its attention along with its resources on two fronts instead of one. Despite these growing concerns Germany still maintained approximately 161 divisions within the Eastern front, and Hitler still believed that victory could be achieved before attention had to be turned to the West.⁴

In early 1943 the Soviets launched a winter offensive that forced the German military into defensive positions along the entire Eastern front. Following a disastrous defeat at Stalingrad, the German army followed with a counter offensive in the East known as Operation Citadel. The German objective was quite simply to shorten their lines of communication and create some breathing room for the Germany military. To do this, German forces would attempt to envelop the Russian army with a two prong attack centering on the Russian town of Kursk. If successful the Russian military would almost certainly have to delay any offensive operations to the West, giving the German Army enough time to reconsolidate for an impending counter attack.

The climax of the operation was the Battle of Kursk, which involved as many as 6,000 tanks, 4,000 aircraft and 2 million men. The battle began on July 5th and lasted until early August, culminating when Hitler, concerned with lack of progress and the allied invasion of Sicily, halted the operation in an attempt to relocate his forces from the East to the West. Many historians attribute the Soviets victory to their improved equipment and numerical fire power. However, if one observes the battle from the principles of war, it is obvious that Germany's inability to adapt

to these principles was just as destructive to their cause as the Russian War industry or its endless supply of soldiers.

Just prior to the battle of Kursk, Germany's ability to replace destroyed weapon systems with new equipment was almost non-existent. By January 1943, the tank losses as a percentage of park hovered around 30%, making it nearly impossible for German commanders to effectively resupply their depleted units.⁵ This shortage of industrial resources coupled with a series of defeats by the Red Army caused many German commanders to reevaluate the German end state of a total victory. Hitler however, deemed this outlook as completely unacceptable and believed that a complete victory could be obtained.⁶ For Hitler the war in the East was not based off strategic necessity but from his ideological belief that Lebensraum or "Living Space" was necessary if Germany was to prosper.

In order to obtain enough land for Germany's expansion, war had to be fought not just against the Soviet Army but against its people. Nothing short of total annihilation was sufficient. It was this very belief that would keep Hitler from allowing his generals to transition from an offensive to defensive posture.⁷ Hitler believed that a decisive victory was needed to bolster the moral of the German people and its allies. Another reason Hitler pushed for an offensive operation was because he believed the area surrounding the salient was somewhat significant to the Russian economy. Hitler believed that by occupying the Kursk salient he would be able to affect the Soviet War effort and thus refused the notion of trading space for time.⁸

So with the misconception of Kursk being vital to Russia's war industry, and Hitler's desire to achieve a decisive victory, Hitler decided that Germany's next operation would have to be offensive in nature. With understanding that the next operation would be offensive in nature, Field Marshal Manstein began to formulate the next phase of the campaign. Because of

equipment and personnel shortages, Manstein did not believe that his forces were sufficient enough for a strategic offensive, and believed that the defense was his only option.

Manstein's chief concern at this point was his lack of armor. In an effort to maintain a superior number of panzer divisions, the total number of tanks in the division was significantly reduced. More importantly, the motorized transportation that was required to support a mechanized division was also reduced, thus hampering any long range capability for any sustained offensive operations.⁹

German shortages coupled with Soviet inexperience led Manstein to the conclusion that an elastic defense and counter stroke would be more beneficial to German victory. Manstein understood offensive operations were more complicated and by forcing the Soviets to attack; he would place additional strains on their ability to control and support their army. Due to the lack of Soviet infrastructure, logistical hubs or caches had to be emplaced along the entire front. Typically these hubs were placed behind the Soviet forces in anticipation of their withdraw. However, when attacking, the Soviets would find it more difficult to sustain operations when moving away from their supply centers.¹⁰ As a result, Soviet advances were often disjointed and unfocused. In essence Manstein wanted to draw the Soviets away from their logistic hubs, attrite their forces through a defense in depth, then counter attack against their extended flanks, thus encircling and destroying the remaining Soviet forces.

To do this Manstein knew he would have to bait the Soviets into attacking, and hoped to this by thing out German forces within the Donbas region through a demonstration. In the Soviet's mind this would overextend the German line, giving the Soviets an opportunity to envelop the German South wing and open a route to the Balkans and Romanian oilfields.¹¹ Although this plan was relatively similar to one of Manstein's previous operations, it relied heavily on the

assumption that the Soviets would initiate the attack and commit a sizeable effort to the Donbas area. This assumption along with Hitler's desire for a decisive victory led to the decision to commit to a more offensive oriented plan.¹²

Manstein believed that a German attack would have limited effects on the Russian war effort and favored a counter attack that would favor the exhausted German Army. But Hitler had two fronts to worry about and wanted to strike the Russians before the Mediterranean theater collapsed. With that in mind, Manstein knew it would be advantageous to strike the Soviets before the Red Army had a chance to replenish its forces. Manstein did not want to get into a resource war with the Soviets, nor did he want any significant replacements to reach the Salient prior to the start of winter.

The Kursk salient was approximately 200 kilometers wide by 150 kilometers deep. The only urban area of importance in this salient was the town of Kursk. The town really didn't hold any significant strategic importance to either the Germans or Russians because the rail lines ran perpendicular to either military front, and could not help in the movement of troops or supplies. Furthermore there was little to no industry that could be seen as beneficial to the Russians, because Kursk's main crop, the sugar beet, could not provide either side with enough substance to sustain heavy operations throughout the winter.¹³

So why was this salient so attractive to the German command? Manstein and his commanders believed that the salient favored speed and maneuverability, two facets of war that the Germans historically did well at. Speed was important given the cumbersome maneuvering of the Soviet Army, and their centralized command structure, which in the past was slow to react to mobile forces. Because Kursk lacked industry, the terrain was comprised mostly of open fields which are ideal for mechanized warfare. The open fields also provided a hindrance to the Soviets ability

to resupply its troops due to its lack of logistical infrastructure. Because the Soviets could not rapidly move troops throughout the country, they had to locate the bulk of their forces as close to the front lines as possible. This provided the Germans with an opportunity to trap a sizeable Soviet force in an area that was ideal for mechanized warfare and rapid assaults.¹⁴

Initially Manstein had wanted to attack the Kursk salient immediately following the German victory at Kharkov, but due to the inability of General Kluge to exert pressure in conjunction with a unified assault, the plan was shelved.¹⁵ Guidance from the Oberkommando des Heeres was to hit the Soviets when they were not prepared, but German reconnaissance continued to show Soviet forces establishing a defensive perimeter along the salient. Instead of cancelling the attack, Hitler postponed it in order to refit his army. By doing so Hitler essentially entered an arms race with the Soviets and assumed that German ingenuity would be able to overcome the Russian masses. As for concerns regarding a Soviet attack, Manstein and his commanders were relatively confident they had time to wait, because they believed Stalin would hold any further offensive operations until the Allies began their invasion into Europe. This in fact was true but it was not because Stalin did not see opportunity in a coordinated attack, but saw advantage in allowing his forces to accumulate.

By 1943 the strategic situation for both Germany and Russia had changed drastically from the previous years. Despite its loss at Stalingrad, the German Army had actually increased by 20% since 1942. The numbers however would become fleeting due to a decrease in support from Hungary, Romania and Italy. On the other hand, the Soviets were experiencing a serious expansion in both manpower and equipment. Upgraded equipment such as the T-34 became the focus of production, and by 1943, 86% of the tanks within the Soviet formation would be either a medium or heavy tank.¹⁶

In fact, by February of 1943, Russia had already received \$376 million worth of tanks and motor vehicles. Allied deliveries for the first couple of months averaged 149,500 tons a month, but in 1943 the Allies increased the Soviet tonnage to roughly 270,350 tons. Stalin realized that if he waited a few more months before launching a large scale counter attack, the Allies would in essence provide him with another 2,000 bombers, 1,500 fighters, 2,500 tanks and 120, 330 motor vehicles. So although the Germans were correct in their belief that Stalin would delay any major offensive operations, they significantly underestimated the capacity of the Soviet war industry, and had in essence entered into an Arms race with the Soviet Union,. By delaying his attack into the salient, Hitler had assumed that German industry would better provide his forces with the means to defeat the Soviets, even with his forces fighting on two fronts and across a much longer line of support.¹⁷

In June 1941 when Germany initially invaded the West, the only substantial forces they faced were the Soviets to the East. This was not the case in July of 1943; the United States and its allies were making sizable gains in Sicily with German casualties were mounting. In January 1943, Germany lost 125,000 men, and in July they lost another 75,000 soldiers along with their equipment during the German surrender in Tunisia. This loss might have paled in comparison to the staggering numbers of the East, but the soldiers and equipment lost in Tunisia were Germany's latest and greatest, and simply could not be replaced.¹⁸

As stated earlier German planners recognized that Kursk was quickly becoming a formidable defensive position for the Soviets, and developed some alternative plans to avoid the Russian strong points. One course of action was to attack frontally from the west where Soviet forces were not completely entrenched in prepared fighting positions. This would have given the Germans a higher probability of breaking the Soviet lines and enveloping their forces. Instead of

a full frontal two pronged attack, Manstein proposed to attack the Russian reserves located along the Steppe Front by bypassing the Brjansker Front to the North. This would negate the Soviets counter attack and exploit the Germans greatest strength in maneuverability while denying the Soviets flexibility.¹⁹

Concurrently, another German contingent would attack the Soviet forces at the base of the salient along the Voronezh Front, enveloping Soviet forces from the rear. Without the strategic reserve threatening their flanks, German forces did not have to worry about extending their lines and would be able to envelop the Red Army without having to pass through the teeth of the main Soviet defensive belt.²⁰

Although the logic behind the Kursk salient was sound, the German High Command made a critical error in assuming that the Russians did not see the battlefield in the same light. Up to this point, Soviet Generals had done a good job in keeping pace with their German counterparts in terms of strategic operations and the emplacement of units throughout the battlefield. The Red Army's fundamental flaw had been more a problem at the higher tactical level, where Soviet field commanders had trouble coordinating actions in the face of the German envelopment.

Because the Soviet military was not as experienced as their German counterparts, they typically favored the defense because it placed less moving parts on the battlefield, and was usually easier to command and control. Likewise the Russian Deputy Commander to Stalin, General Zhukov, made a deliberate decision to fight in the defense based on the fact that the Red Army had issues with combined arms operations, and saw great opportunity to seed the terrain with obstacles. So as to why Hitler decided to maintain the status quo when it was obvious that the Russians were prepared for an assault is difficult to understand. To make matters worse, the

Germans were planning on attacking the salient with three armies or about 600,000 men, 2,000 tanks, and 500 aircraft.²¹

The Russians had approximately two million men on the salient with 5,130 tanks and 3,200 aircraft. This is obviously against the military principles of a 3:1 force ratio for attacking against the defense. But Hitler feared time was running out and did not wish to postpone the battle any longer than it already was. He did not want to endure another Russian winter and believed a decisive victory against the Soviets at the salient would provide the German allies with a much needed morale boost.²²

Within the salient there were two hinges that rejoined the Soviet forces on the bulge with those occupying the main lines. Thus the most reasonable assumption would be that the Soviets would emplace the bulk of its forces along these points. If the Germans could mass on these points and break through, then they would not only envelop the occupying Soviet forces, but place themselves in a position in which they could drive deep into the Russian frontier. In order to do this the Germans would have to commit a joint force at either hinge, mass its force and attack with speed and audacity limiting the Soviets time to react. Of course this was easier said than done. The hinges of salient's were miniscule in terms of area to maneuver large mechanized forces, and the relative short distance between the German and Soviet lines had made it easy for Russian scouts to determine the direction of attack. Furthermore, the restrictive terrain would act as a choke point and would canalize any force attempting to traverse it.²³

Unlike past operations, the German forces were lacking tactical surprise and enough maneuver space that would allow them to bypass the enemy's strong points. The upcoming battle was soon taking on characteristics reminiscent of World War I rather than the German notion of Blitzkrieg. Germany's past successes was based on their ability to force an opening on a small

front so disruptive and powerful that it would allow a massive penetration of the enemy's line. However Hitler's inability to provide Manstein with additional forces negated Germany's ability to properly mass. Hitler instead relied on his ability to supply his forces with superior equipment and assumed that his commanders would be able to exploit the Soviets inexperience.

For now, both forces had a basic understanding of what the other planned to do, it was now a matter of force build up, and initiating the attack. During the first year and a half of the invasion, the Germans had not only been outnumbered, but had experienced some serious issues with their vaunted weapon systems. Obviously this was a serious issue for a German military that relied so heavily on its technical superiority.

Going into the war, the ratio between the German and Soviet forces was almost one to one.²⁴ Standard practice for a unit in the attack against the defense is 3:1; however German planners believed this vulnerability could be offset by both the Germans superior training and modernization. In the fall of 1942, Germany began to see upgraded equipment arriving to the eastern front. By May 1943, Tiger production had increased six fold, and production of a new main battle tank, the Panther would begin momentarily. Additionally the German Army began to see upgraded assault guns and tank destroyers by May 1943.

This was crucial because the assault guns and tank destroyers typically supported the infantry, and without them they would not have adequate anti-armor capability.²⁵ However instead of distributing the equipment equally throughout the entire Army, Hitler would equip his premier units first, creating a disproportional level of capabilities within its ranks. Because both armies had fair understanding of what the other was planning to do, Hitler decided to further equip his forces, since conducting an attack with no tactical surprise was counterintuitive.²⁶

As for the Soviets, their victory at Stalingrad created a monumental increase in Russian morale that not only affected the military, but the economy as well. The accelerated development of the War Industry made it possible to equip the military with modern weapons that could finally stand against German ingenuity. The Soviet Armed forces had also become stronger through a heightened recruiting drive, spurred on by a nationalistic surge created by recent battlefield success. This is essential when comparing the force ratio of both armies. The German planners accepted risk in conducting the attack without a 3:1 ratio, however with increase in Soviet capability, the assumption that their equipment and training would offset the size of the Soviet army was quickly becoming less likely.

Another important aspect to consider was the Soviet transformation within its command structure. Prior to the victory at Stalingrad, Stalin would implement changes throughout the Army's force structure that would empower its military commanders with more authority regarding military matters. Stalin realized that his strength was not in the operational decision making of day to day affairs, so he appointed a very capable and respected military commander in Marshal Zhukov as the chief deputy.²⁷

This was important because in 1937-1938 Stalin purged his army in order to reassert the party's political influence over the military. This decision would have disastrous effects on the Red Army during the initial campaigns of the War. Generals were not able to make decisions on troop movements without the consent of a military commissar and required the commissar's signature before even the most basic operation could be executed. By 1942 Stalin realized that in order to defeat the Germans, he would need to streamline the decision making process and unify his armies under a leader who was capable of making rapid and responsible decisions. To further improve the relations between party officials and military commanders, Stalin forced the

political officials within the military chain of command to commission as junior grade officers, and serve time on the front line. This granted those who could affect the decision making process with invaluable and often times hard lessons learned.²⁸

To counter the expected German offensive Stalin sent two of the Red Army's best Commanders, Generals Georgy Zhukov and Alexander Vasilievski to Kursk, so they could oversee its defensive preparations. They determined that the main attack would occur on General Nikolai Vatutin's "Voronezh front" opposite Belgorod and placed two veteran armies from the Battle of Stalingrad there. The largest portion of the salient was under the command of General Konstantin Rokossovskiy. By June the Kursk salient had more artillery pieces than infantry regiments, over 20,000 pieces with approximately 6,000 anti-tank guns and 920 Kaytusha multiple rocket throwers. Concurrently while the Russians were making great strides with resources provided by the Allies, the Germans were suffering from continual production delays or outright canceling of new equipment.²⁹

Although the Soviets had a general idea where Hitler would attack they did not necessarily know exactly where he would concentrate the bulk of his forces. General Zhukov's plan called for a two front defense of Kursk. General Rokossovskiy's Central Front in the northern sector and General Vatutin's Voronezh Front in the south would prepare a defense in depth with the mission to attrite German Armor. Both fronts were mainly comprised of infantry and anti-tank guns, with a tank army acting as a mobile reserve.

To the east of the fronts, Zhukov placed his strategic reserve of tanks under the command of General Ivan Konev's Steppe Front. General Konev's reserves main mission was to conduct the counter attack, but had the "be prepared mission" to assist in the defense should the Germans break the line. Thinking the brunt of German armor would attack from the North, General

Zhukov placed the bulk of his mobile reserve along an arc centered on the town Tula.³⁰ Finally to the south there was a much smaller group of reserves containing two armor corps and widely scattered away from the front.³¹

As stated earlier, it was obvious where the Germans would attack and due to the relatively small area and proximity of forces, the Russians even knew when the Germans would attack. The plan of battle called for the 9th Army commanded by General Model to attack from the North and the 4th, Panzer Army commanded by Manstein, to attack from the South. Due to the high proportion of Soviet forces to the North, the 9th German Army's movement was significantly slower than its southern counterpart. By the second day, the 9th Army only advanced fourteen kilometers and by July 9th, they came to a virtual standstill.

One possible reason for this standstill might suggest that it was not the Soviet defense that kept the 9th Army from advancing south, but because General Model was concerned his forces had become too exposed to a possible Soviet counter attack. By contrast the attack by the 4th and Kempf Army was more successful. General Manstein's forces were comprised of units outfitted with the latest German technology and was simply slaughtering the Soviet units that stood in their way, destroying approximately 850 Soviet tanks in the first two days of the assault.³²

By July 11th, the Southern group was close to a decisive breakthrough so the Soviets launched a counter offensive comprised of two armies from their reserve. The counter attack converged on the 4th German Army's Eastern flank but was unable to press the attack due to their heavy losses of tanks. Conversely the Germans lost a large amount of infantry, but were able to continue the attack with their remaining tanks and reserve forces.³³ One of the strengths of the German two prong attack was that mutually supporting units forced the enemy to divert pressure from one front in order to reinforce the other. Although Model and the 9th were experiencing

complications to the North, the 4th Army's ability to penetrate south prevented the Soviets from exploiting Model and the 9th Army with a significant counter attack. ³⁴

Unfortunately for the Germans, Manstein would not be able to exploit his success in the south because Hitler ordered a halt to the operation due to the allied invasion of Sicily. In order to shore up the German forces in the West and the collapse of his Italian ally, Hitler had decided to withdraw a substantial force from the East in order to reinforce his units in the West. Manstein attempted to dissuade Hitler by stating any forces sent to help in Italy would arrive too late, and would not in any way alter the outcome.³⁵ The Soviets on the other hand used this pause to refit and shore up their defensive positions by concentrating their forces around the town of Kursk.

Up until this point the Germans lost approximately 262 of 2,000 tanks and anti tank guns, while the Soviets lost approximately 1,600 tanks and guns. Although the ratio to loss of critical end items favored the Soviet military, the German army was still more than capable of continuing their assault. Clearly the Germans, at least in the South were making progress in regards to driving through the Soviets defense. In the end the German momentum was lost, and the Battle of Kursk would end in German defeat. The Red Army would eventually mount a series of counter offensives, which would end with the fall of Berlin in 1945.³⁶

Historically the German defeat at Kursk had been linked to the Soviets numerical superiority and modernized equipment. Although Soviet force modernization and superior numbers cannot be discounted, neither can Germany's inability to execute Operation Citadel through the Principles of War. The United States Army Field Manual FM 3-0 breaks the Principles of War into nine categories. For the purpose of this monograph, we will examine three of the nine principles, focusing on Objective, Unity of Command and Massing of combat power. We will examine how Germany's objective of total victory was unrealistic and counter productive in

regards to German planning. How Hitler's inability to provide a command structure capable of directing all forces in pursuit of a unified goal confused and piecemealed both the planning and execution of Kursk. And how the Soviets were able to transform the way they conducted warfare by implementing a combined arms approach which allowed them to mass combat power at the decisive place and time.

With the German defeat at Stalingrad and North Africa, and Japan's hold in the east weakening, it was obvious to Hitler that Germany was quickly losing the initiative. With the German lines of communication being extended on two fronts, and a revitalized Soviet War Industry operating at maximum capacity, it was quite obvious to all that a decisive German victory could not be achieved.³⁷ Had Operation Citadel achieved success, the outcome of that victory would have been marginal in terms of Germany's ability to achieve total victory or even a strategic stalemate. But because of Germany's recent defeat at Moscow and Stalingrad, Hitler and his Generals were overly eager to achieve success and show their Allies that they were capable of achieving a total victory. A more realistic objective would have been the establishment of a mobile defense, such as Manstein had initially proposed. This defense in depth would attrite the Soviet Forces, extend their already overburdened logistical lines while providing the German military with an opportunity to reconsolidate its exhausted forces. Rather than seek a decisive victory, Germany's objective should have been to reduce Soviet forces to a point in which a diplomatic solution could be attained.³⁸

The second principle of war that will be examined is Unity of Command. The Joint Forces Publication defines Unity of Command as the employment of military forces in a manner that masses combat power toward a common objective. In Germany's case this occurred at the strategic level but not at the operational level. On 6 February 1943, Manstein attended a

conference at Wolfschaze where he broached the topic of the “uniformity of leadership” by asking Hitler if he could appoint a Chief of Staff that could unify the German Field Marshals. Hitler replied that he “had reservations in doing so because certain aspects of command could not be delegated”. Furthermore, Goering was Hitler’s second in command, and he “had not much confidence in a system where the Reich Marshal would be subordinated to an appointment filled from the ranks of the professional non-party military.”³⁹ Because Hitler was not willing to delegate authority to his commanders, as Stalin did with Zhukov, German operations tended to take longer to execute and often missed opportunities to obtain the initiative. An example of such an opportunity was General Kluge’s inability to exert pressure on the Northern hinge of the Salient following Manstein’s victory at Kharkov.⁴⁰ Because Hitler refused to unite his Field Marshals under one command, one could not expect a unified effort within a reasonable amount of time. By not providing a unified command at the operational level, Hitler invariably caused a division of effort among his commanders that often times exasperated inter branch rivalries producing at best limited results.

A subcategory of a Unified Command is the freedom to act independently. One of the most important aspects of freedom of action is the superior commander’s willingness to allow his subordinate to work in a decentralized environment. In order for a unit to maintain flexibility, the ground commander must be allowed to take initiative. Because the fog war produces a certain amount of uncertainty, it is essential that a superior trust his subordinate to make the right decision.⁴¹ Manstein was not given this freedom of action during the battle of Kursk and his plan was often changed by the German High Command, taking whatever initiative that did exist, and giving it to the Soviet Army.

Mutual trust between the superior and subordinate is the cog that allows one to retain the ability to exercise freedom of action. Most field commanders had this mutual trust between one another. In fact, Manstein's orders for counter attack at Kursk simply read "Army Group South defends mold position and joining northern front to Slawjansk, strikes with newly organized 4th Tank Army enemy in gap between 1st Tank Army and Kempf Army and covers the deep flank and a the attack of 4th Army in the area forward Poltawa." ⁴².

Obviously this shows Manstein did not feel the need to lay all implied tasks out, but instead trusted his subordinates to make the right decision. Unfortunately that trust did not reside with Hitler and his Field Marshals. In fact during the planning of Kursk, Hitler dictated the time of the attack, the concept of operation, and task organization as well as the order of march. He specifically stated how Manstein would use his reserve, taking away any freedom action or initiative from one of his greatest commanders. ⁴³

The battle of Kursk was not only a decisive engagement for Soviet force in terms of operational initiative, but also marked a transformation in the way the Soviets would employ their ground forces. The Soviets ability to adapt to German tactics and its employment of new procedures of ground maneuver elements was essential to the Russian victory. The Soviets ability to counter the German Blitzkrieg by establishing pure anti-tank reserves coupled with mobile obstacle detachments was a huge step for Soviet techniques and procedures. By taking a page from their German adversaries and adopting the concept of the combined arms approach, the Soviets were able to make full use of their vast military. In attaching armor units to every infantry regiment the Soviet dispersion of combat power granted greater flexibility and force projection.

This new concept also gave Soviet Field Commanders more range and rapid responsiveness while conducting the counter attack. The combined arms approach maximized the strengths of the individual branches by providing it's infantry with anti-armor capabilities and its armor formations with greater security. More over, the Soviet Commanders employed new methods in organizing and conducting offensive operations. The adaption of deep echeloned forces denied the Germans the ability to mass fires on a single large component and provided the Soviets with the space and time to transition from movement to maneuver.

More space meant the Soviet commander had more time to identify a point of weakness within the German line. In order for the Soviet counter attack to succeed; it was necessary to breech the German lines before they had a chance to fully react. To do this the Soviets narrowed their zone of attack to 3 kilometers for a division and 1 kilometer for a regiment. By doing this, the Soviet's massed 4 Infantry Battalions, 20 tanks and more than 100 indirect fire systems for every kilometer of penetration. This new method of massing forces was in stark contrast to earlier attempts in which the Soviet command and control was not effective enough to organize and implement such a force. Beginning with Stalingrad, innovations such as uninterrupted reconnaissance, main and alternate C2 nodes and improvement in wireless communications, allowed the Soviets to adapt to German maneuver and mass its forces in a synchronized effort.⁴⁴

In conclusion Kursk is a perfect illustration of how ignoring the principles of war and not adapting to your enemy can and will have dire consequences in terms of victory or defeat. When planning the operation, Hitler and his Generals were much more hesitant than they were during the 1941 and 1942 German offensives. Of course Hitler had reason to be hesitant after suffering heavy defeats in North Africa and Stalingrad. In fact many historians believe that Hitler had some serious doubts concerning Operation Citadel.⁴⁵ Regardless, the delaying of the attack on

Kursk provided the Soviets with enough time to prepare their positions and replenish their forces. Although one cannot definitively fault Hitler and his commanders in their reasoning, one cannot deny that the additional time given to Stalin was crucial in his ability to prepare his forces.

In regards to unity of command and freedom of action, it was Hitler's inability to change and Stalin's ability to adapt that facilitated the German defeat. The Russians not only adapted the way they waged war, but adapted their command structure in order to better facilitate these new measures. For Russia, the most relevant change was the metamorphosis from a military run by politicians to an organization overseen by the party but run by professional soldiers.⁴⁶ Stalin's confidence in Zhukov was in stark comparison to the relation between Hitler and Manstein. Had Hitler heeded the advice of Manstein's "back handed" approach, the Russians might have expended more resources in the initial assault, and thus been more vulnerable to a German counter attack.⁴⁷ As Carl von Clausewitz states in his book titled *On War*, the defense is theoretically stronger than the offense, especially if one faces a force with numerical superiority. That said, the notion that Germany would be able to indefinitely withstand Russian attacks for an indefinite period of time is foolhardy. By 1943, the Soviet industry had reached a point where they could produce ten times as many goods than their Russian counterparts. The bottom line was the growing material imbalance between the two countries would have made the possibility of a Russian offensive operation that much more plausible.

When looking at the fundamental principles of war, it is clear that the Soviets demonstrated a far greater grasp in application than Hitler and his staff. From the operational planning to the execution, the Soviet Army showed the ability to grow. The Germans on the other hand remained marred in the doctrine of their past campaigns. The Russian showed more flexibility in

adapting to German tactics than their counterparts. General Zhukov clearly understood the Russian Center of Gravity, whereas Hitler became attached to Nazi dogma and ideology.

Hitler's greatest weakness was his belief that the Nazi strategy could be won through superior equipment and race. It was this ideology that contributed the most to the failure at Kursk. Religious-like fanaticism kept him from realizing that a total victory was unattainable and completely removed any notion of a diplomatic solution. The removal of a biased mind and inflexible approach to operational art will almost ensure failure from the start. In order for operational art to be flexible, one must purge any preconceived notions of superiority. Otherwise the only relevant action to be taken will be overly aggressive in nature.⁴⁸

In the end the recommendations of a proven Field Marshal's such as Manstein were overruled by the premise of a Nazi ideology. This inevitably doomed Germany to the very same outcome that cost them the opportunity to decisively win the campaign by capturing Moscow. Hitler's resistance to the notion of total war cannot be attained when time is finite. The notion that the Germans could defeat the Soviet Union decisively was attainable in 1943, however after the battle at Kursk the initiative permanently switched hands and victory was lost forever.

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- ³ Mosier, John. 2010. *Deathride : Hitler vs. Stalin--The Eastern Front, 1941-1945*. 1 Simon & Schuer hardcover ed. New York: Simon & Schuster,
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- ⁵ DiNardo, R. L. 1997. *Germany's panzer arm*. Contributions in military studies. Vol. 166. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press.
- ⁶ Kasdorf, Bruno. *The Battle of Kursk:An Analysis of Strategic and Operational Principals*. US Army War College, 2000.
- ⁷ Korol'kov, Yu pg 23
- ⁸ Pierce, Kerry pg 5
- ⁹ Dinardo, R.L. pg 26
- ¹⁰ Clark, Alan. 1967. *Barbarossa: the Russian-German conflict 1941-1945*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. pg 306
- ¹¹ Kasdorf, Bruno pg 11
- ¹² Kasdorf, Bruno pg 12
- ¹³ Mosier, John pg 236
- ¹⁴ Mosier, John pg 236
- ¹⁵ Clark, Alan pg 322
- ¹⁶ Zetterling, Niklas, and Anders Frankson. 2000. *Kursk 1943 : a statistical analysis*. Cass series on the Soviet (Russian) study of war. Vol. 11. London ; Portland, Or: Frank Cass, <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fy0652/00021357-d.html>.
- ¹⁷ Mosier, John pg 236
- ¹⁸ Mosier, John pg 237
- ¹⁹ Kasdorf, Bruno pg 14
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- ²⁶ Mosier, John, pg 246
- ²⁷ Chant, Christopher. 1975. *Kursk. Great battles.* London: Almark Publishing, pg 67
- ²⁸ Overy, R. J. 1997. *Russia's war: blood upon the snow.* New York: TV Books: Distributed by Penguin Putnam. pg 189.
- ²⁹ Clark, Alan pg 327
- ³⁰ Pierce, Kerry. pg 9
- ³¹ Mosier, John, pg 247
- ³² Mosier, John pg 249
- ³³ Kasdorf, Bruno pg 16
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- ⁴¹ Kasdorf, Bruno pg 20
- ⁴² Kasdorf, Bruno pg 21
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- ⁴⁴ Pospelov, P. N., and Institute marksizma-leninizma. 1960; 1965. *History of the Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union, 1941-1945.* Moscow: Military Publishing House of the Ministry of Defense of the USSR.
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⁴⁶ Overy, R. J. pg 186

⁴⁷ Pierce, Kerry pg 34

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