

At the start of Operation Barbarossa, German forces crossed the Russian border and quickly crushed the Soviet defenders with Hitler's "lightning war" tactics.

WARFARE HISTORY NETWORK PRESENTS:

# **Operation Barbarossa: WWII'S EASTERN FRONT**

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Signal Magazine

# The Bloody Triangle

WITH THE GERMAN INVASION OF RUSSIA IN JUNE 1941, THE STANDARD WAS SET FOR THE COMING GREAT TANK BATTLES ON THE EASTERN FRONT.

*By Victor J. Kamenir*

In 1941, the northwestern corner of the Ukraine was not what one would call tank country. With the exception of a few narrow, poorly maintained highways, movement was largely restricted to unpaved roads running through terrain dominated by forests, hills, small marshy rivers, and swamps.

Yet, during the first week of Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union, a tank battle involving up to 3,000 armored vehicles took place there. This struggle in a roughly triangular area bounded by the cities of Lutsk, Rovno, and Brody, became the forerunner of the brutal armored clashes on the Eastern Front. •

On June 22, 1941, Panzer Group 1, the armored spearhead of German Army Group South, breached the Soviet

lines near the border town of Vladimir-Volynski at the juncture of the Soviet Fifth and Sixth Armies. As a result of this skillful tactical move, a gap 40 kilometers wide allowed the jubilant Wehrmacht troops to pour into Soviet territory. The Soviet Fifth Army, commanded by Maj. Gen. M. I. Potapov, bore the brunt of the enemy thrust, desperately attempting to slow the German tide.

The German operational plans called for a rapid advance

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A Red Army tank burns fiercely as German tanks and infantry move to control the scene.

to the Ukrainian capital of Kiev, capturing it and reaching the Dnepr River just beyond the city. After achieving this objective, the German troops were to swing south along the river, trapping the bulk of forces of the Soviet Southwestern and Southern Fronts (Army Groups). The capture of Lutsk, an important road nexus, would allow the mobile German units an opportunity to break out into open terrain and advance along two axes to Kiev: the Lutsk-Rovno-Zhitomir-Kiev thrust and the Lutsk-Dubno-Berdichev-Kiev thrust.

At the end of the first day of war, Lt. Gen. M.P. Kirponos, commander of the Southwestern Front, received instructions from the Soviet National Defense Committee to immediately counterattack in the direction of Vladimir-Volynski, destroy the German forces operating from that area, and occupy the city of Lyublin by the end of June 24. The fact that the city of Lyublin was located over 80 kilometers inside German-occupied Poland caused General Kirponos to wonder if the Soviet High Command really understood the unfolding situation on the border.

EVEN THOUGH HE REALIZED THAT HIS mission was unrealistic, Kirponos was obliged to carry out his order. The problem facing him was twofold. Not only was the Soviet defensive situation unstable, but the five mechanized corps earmarked for the counteroffensive were spread throughout the northwestern Ukraine. It would take some units up to three days to arrive in the area of operations. Therefore, all five mechanized corps would be committed into combat piecemeal, with marginal or nonexistent cooperation among them.

The tight schedule did not allow Kirponos sufficient time to concentrate his forces and adequately prepare for the counterattack. To further complicate the situation, many units of Soviet mechanized corps were mechanized in name only. Many regiments of the motorized infantry divisions lacked wheeled transport, and many artillery regiments were woefully short of prime movers. There were widespread shortages of communications equipment and artillery, especially armor-piercing ammunition.

As the Soviet mechanized formations began moving toward the border, the German Luftwaffe launched relentless and merciless air attacks on the armored columns strung out along the narrow roads. Often, the Soviet drivers, desperately trying to maneuver for cover, became bogged down in the difficult terrain and had to abandon or blow up their vehicles. The attrition of poorly maintained armored vehicles due to mechanical breakdowns

began to reach alarming proportions. Due to losses from air attacks and mechanical failures, some Soviet tank formations eventually went into action with less than 50 percent of their operational strength.

Still, the forces converging on Panzer Group I were formidable, almost double the number of panzers available to Lt. Gen. Paul L. Ewald von Kleist. The actual prewar strength of the five Soviet mechanized corps consisted of roughly 3,140 tanks. Even allowing for a large percentage of non-combat losses during the approach to battle, these numbers still dwarfed the approximately 618 tanks that were available to the German commander.

In the early afternoon of June 24, one of the tank divisions of the 22nd Mechanized Corps came into contact with the advancing Germans west of Lutsk. This division, the 19th, was severely brutalized by the German air attacks during its approach and was plagued by mechanical breakdowns. Its remaining 45 light T-26 tanks and 12 armored cars were combined into one provisional regiment and committed into action after a short preparatory artillery barrage. A seesaw fight with units from the German 14th Panzer Division raged for two hours during which the Soviet unit lost most of its remaining armored vehicles and was forced to fall back to nearly 15 kilometers west of Lusk.

The fight was costly for both sides. The commander of the 22nd Mechanized Corps, Maj. Gen. S.M. Kondrusev, was killed, and the commander of the 19th Tank Division was wounded. All the regimental commanders in the division were also killed or wounded. However, as the result of their sacrifice, the 14th Panzer Division suffered heavy losses as well and was not able to take Lutsk.

During the night of June 24-25, elements from the other two divisions of the 22nd Mechanized Corps began to take up their positions alongside the remains of the 19th Tank Division. Fuel shortages were severe, and the Soviet officers partially overcame this problem by siphoning fuel from disabled vehicles and distributing it to still operational machines.

The Soviet units were hardly in shape to fight when the Germans seized the initiative in a dawn attack. In a savage battle that lasted into late afternoon, the Soviet forces disputed every inch of ground. The Germans, steadily grinding down the outgunned light T-26 and BT tanks, came up against a dozen of the monstrous Red Army KV-2 heavy tanks. German shells simply bounced off the thick armor of the KV-2's ungainly high and boxy turrets. On those few occasions when the KV-2s did manage to bring



A squad of German Panzergrenadiers pushes on across the muddy Russian countryside during the Battle of Glossoff.

their 152mm howitzers into play, they were able to temporarily check the German advance.

THE BEST DEFENSE THE GERMANS HAD against these monsters was to wait them out, allowing the Soviet tanks to run out of ammunition and fuel. On one occasion, the crew of a KV-2 tank, its turret ring jammed, out of ammunition and almost out of fuel, drove their vehicle off a steep bank into a river, the driver bailing out at the last moment. More suitable as self-propelled artillery, the small numbers of KV-2s that actually entered the fight did not pose more than a minor local inconvenience to the German panzers.

Finally, in fading daylight, and silhouetted by the fires of the burning suburbs around them, the 13th Panzer Division broke into Lutsk after a successful flank attack, forcing the Soviet units to evacuate the city. The desperate fight of the 22nd Mechanized Corps bought valuable time, slowing down two German corps for a day and a half. It also allowed time for the Soviet 9th Mechanized Corps to arrive and deploy in the Rovno area, 65 kilometers east of Lutsk.

At the same time that the Germans continued to exploit the gap breached between the Fifth and Sixth Armies, they also advanced south from Lutsk toward the towns of Brody and Dubno, taking Dubno by nightfall. The situation of the Fifth Army was indeed grave. Many of its units found themselves surrounded and fighting for their lives,

scattered all the way from the border to Lutsk. The remains of the 22nd Mechanized Corps were streaming in disorder along the highway to Rovno, spreading panic as they went. Only the direct involvement of some of the staff officers from the headquarters of the Fifth Army restored partial order.

Throughout June 26, the Germans attempted to batter their way into Rovno along the Lutsk-Rovno and Dubno-Rovno highways. Unable to do so due to the stubborn resistance of the Fifth Army, they switched their aim south to Rovno, along the secondary roads to the town of Ostrog. The fall of Ostrog would have allowed the Germans to surround the Soviet forces defending Rovno or, at least, force them to pull back.

The Soviet 19th Mechanized Corps, under Maj. Gen. N.V. Feklenko, moved to intercept this new threat and crashed in behind the 11th and 13th Panzer Divisions, which formed the German spearhead. The furious Soviet attack scattered several German supporting units and advanced up to 30 kilometers into German-held territory. In the early afternoon, the Soviet 43rd Tank Division, the vanguard of the attack, fought its way to the eastern outskirts of Dubno. German anti-tank artillery inflicted heavy casualties on the light T-26 tanks, which made up the bulk of the 19th Mechanized Corps.

With impressive tactical handling, the German commanders reacted to this new threat and counterattacked the two dangerously overextended Soviet tank divisions.

Caught between the anvil of two German infantry divisions and the hammer of two panzer divisions, Major General Feklenko ordered his corps to pull back to its starting positions in the vicinity of Rovno. By nightfall the fighting had died down, and Dubno remained firmly in German hands.

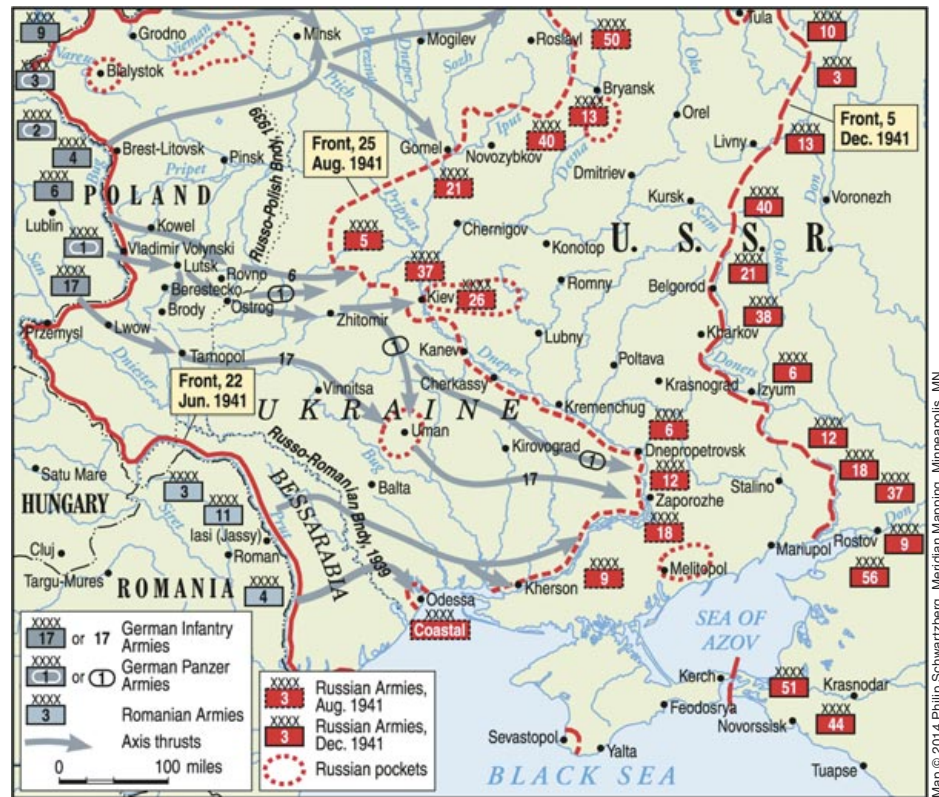
While the fighting raged around Dubno, two more Soviet mechanized corps, the 8th and 15th, joined the fray. These two strong corps attacked from Brody, advanced 35 kilometers and cut German lines of communication around the small town of Berestechko, 45 kilometers west of Dubno. For a short time a real possibility existed of encircling the Germans around Dubno.

The 8th and 15th Mechanized Corps were the strongest encountered by the Germans thus far. Even after losses to air attacks and mechanical failures, these two corps still contained approximately 1,500 tanks between them. More significantly, these Soviet formations included approximately 250 new T-34 medium and KV-1 heavy tanks. Unfortunately for the Soviets, the T-34s and KV-1s were not concentrated into large formations. Rather, they were dispersed in small units throughout the two corps.

The appearance of T-34s and KV-1s took the Germans by complete surprise. The German tankers quickly found that their new adversaries were in many ways more than a match for the panzers.

The majority of German field artillery pieces proved only marginally effective in countering these tanks. However, the 88mm anti-aircraft cannon, acting in a direct-fire antitank role, proved very effective.

The German panzer commanders had to quickly improvise new tactics in dealing with superior Soviet tanks. Utilizing their superior tactical proficiency and the higher training levels of their drivers, the German panzers would maneuver out of the way of T-34s and KV-1s, all the while whittling away at lighter BT-5/7s and T-26s. The German field artillery, taking advantage of its greater mobility, would act in a close-support role and soak up the attack of the Soviet tanks. The Germans PzKpfw IIIs and IVs, after dealing with the lighter Soviet tanks, would circle



**Bordered by the Ukrainian villages of Lutsk, Rovno, and Brody, German and Soviet forces clashed in a massive tank battle that would serve as a precursor for the great armored struggles to come.**

back and attack the T-34s and KV-1s from their more vulnerable sides and rear.

The higher German rate of fire was a significant counteract superior Soviet tanks. For every round managed by the Soviet tankers, the Germans could usually respond with two to four rounds in return. The sheer volume of fire would often result in hits on vulnerable areas like gun barrels, turret rings, and tracks. Immobilized due to combat damage, mechanical failure, or difficult terrain, the Soviet tanks would then succumb to a barrage of fire. German combat engineers displayed significant courage in approaching the immobile but still firing Soviet tanks and destroying them with satchel charges.

OFTEN, THE INEXPERIENCED SOVIET DRIVERS moved along the most easily negotiated routes, even if that meant exposing their tanks to greater enemy fire. For example, many of them would guide their vehicles along the tops of ridges or hills, presenting large silhouettes to German gunners.

The behavior of Soviet crews in combat was extremely uneven as well. On some occasions, they would abandon



Stuka dive-bombers of the German Luftwaffe fly in formation over the battlefield on the Eastern Front.

the fight or bail out of their vehicles at the slightest setback. On other occasions, the Soviet soldiers would fight with fatalistic determination even when the tactical situation did not dictate it and when nothing would be gained by their sacrifice.

The lack of radio communications among the Soviet tank forces was a major factor of their relatively poor performance and higher casualties. Below the battalion level, very few Soviet tanks had radios. Motorcycle drivers were used to carry messages over distances longer than the line of sight, while Soviet tank company and platoon commanders had to resort to hand and flag signals. This resulted in a tendency for Soviet tanks to bunch up close to their leaders so as to see and follow their signals. After losing their leaders, the Soviet crews, who were not trained or encouraged to display tactical initiative, were much easier prey for the skilled German tankers.

Mixed in among the Soviet armor, 41 monstrous T-35 heavy tanks rumbled toward the Germans. Mounting five turrets, manned by a crew of 10, too heavy and too slow, these obsolete tanks suffered multiple mechanical breakdowns or became otherwise immobilized before ever coming to grips with the enemy.

In early July, an after-action report forwarded to the headquarters of the Southwestern Front by the staff of the

8th Mechanized Corps stated that all 45 of its T-35 tanks were lost. Four machines had been abandoned when the advancing Germans overran the 8th Corps bases, 32 suffered mechanical breakdowns, and two were destroyed by the German air attacks during the approach to battle. Only seven T-35s actually entered the fight, and all of these were destroyed by the enemy. Since the Soviet forces were virtually without any means to retrieve and evacuate the disabled combat vehicles, all the T-35s were lost.

The battle around Berestechko turned into a grinding, fire-breathing nightmare that chewed up men and machines on both sides. German aircraft pounded the Soviet positions without letup. In one attack they succeeded in wounding Maj. Gen. Karpezo, commander of the 15th Mechanized Corps, at his command post.

In his war diary, the Chief of German Army General Staff, General Franz Halder, noted: "... the heavy fighting continues on the right flank of Panzer Group 1. The Russian 8th Tank Corps achieved deep penetration of our positions ... this caused major disorder in our rear echelons in the area between Brody and Dubno. Dubno is threatened from the south-west ... "

Even though they were causing severe problems for the Germans, the two Soviet armored formations were exhausting themselves. The attrition of men, machines,



**Stuka dive-bombers of the German Luftwaffe fly in formation over the battlefield on the Eastern Front.**

and equipment was reaching alarming proportions. Despite Lt. Gen. Kirponos's pleas to pull his forces back for rest and reinforcement, Stavka, the Soviet High Command, ordered him to continue the offensive.

On the morning of June 28, the Germans launched a counteroffensive of their own against the depleted Soviet formations. German reconnaissance was able to find the exposed left flank of the 8th Mechanized Corps, and a four-division attack began to roll up the Soviet units. By afternoon, each of the three divisions of the 8th Mechanized Corps found itself surrounded. They received orders to fight their way out and two were able to do so. The third however, the 34th Tank Division, was completely destroyed, losing all of its tanks and other vehicles. Its commander, Colonel I.V. Vasilyev, was killed as well. Only about 1,000 men led by the commissar of the 8th Mechanized Corps, N.K. Popel, fought their way out. During the day's fighting the corps lost over 10,000 men and 96 tanks, as well as over half its artillery.

The 15th Mechanized Corps was taking severe casualties as well, and during the night of June 29, both corps were finally permitted to retreat south of Brody. The Soviet formations began to fight desperate rearguard actions, trying to disengage from the enemy. On the evening of the 30th, German aircraft conducted a major attack on Soviet mechanized columns retreating in the direction of Zolochiv and turned the highway around the city into a huge funeral pyre of vehicles.

At the same time that the 8th and 15th Corps were entering the fight, the 9th Mechanized Corps was finally able to concentrate for its own attack on Dubno. Coming up on line, its commander, Maj. Gen. K.K. Rokossovsky, a future marshal of the Soviet Union, observed large numbers of Red Army soldiers aimlessly wondering around the woods. He quickly detailed several of his staff officers to round up the stragglers, arm them as best as they could, and put them back into ranks.

To his dismay, Rokossovsky found several high-ranking officers trying to hide among the stragglers. In his memoirs, Rokossovsky wrote that he was severely tempted to shoot one "panic-monger," a colonel with whom he had a heated conversation. Tough-as-nails Rokossovsky, a survivor of Stalin's prewar purges of the military officer corps, allowed the colonel to redeem himself and lead a makeshift unit into combat.

ON THE MORNING OF JUNE 27, IT WAS ROKOS-  
sovsky's turn to launch his corps, numbering only 200 light tanks, into action against Dubno. The 9th Mechanized Corps met heavy resistance right away, and the Germans began to probe around its unprotected flanks and infiltrate the gaps between its units, threatening to surround the corps.

Like the commander of the 19th Mechanized Corps the previous day, Rokossovsky was forced to order a retreat by nightfall without achieving his objective. His attack, however, delayed the German advance and relieved pressure on the 19th Mechanized Corps, which was retreating in the direction of Rovno.

Together with mauled infantry formations of the Fifth Army, the two mechanized corps continued to stubbornly defend Rovno for another day despite the best German efforts to take the city. Their valiant stand was in vain. On the evening of June 28, the German 11th Panzer Division captured the city of Ostrog and established a bridgehead across the Goryn River. The Soviet forces defending Rovno were suddenly threatened with an unpleasant possibility of being left on the wrong side of the river, with German units breaking into their rear echelons. Reluctantly, the Soviet forces abandoned Rovno and pulled back across the river to take up defensive positions in the Tuchin-Goschi area.

With the fall of Ostrog, the Battle of the "Bloody Triangle" was effectively over. The battered Soviet formations managed to hold the line at the Goryn River until July 2, before finally being forced farther back.

On July 7, the five Soviet mechanized corps that participated in fighting in the “Bloody Triangle” mustered 679 tanks out of a prewar strength of 3,140. The Soviet Fifth Army, though bled white, was not defeated, and the majority of its combat formations, although having suffered appalling casualties, were not destroyed. The Fifth Army, clinging to the southern edge of the Pripjat Marshes, continued to pose a threat to the left flank and rear of the German advance on Kiev, capital city of the Ukraine. It constituted such a major thorn in the German side that Adolf Hitler specifically called for its annihilation in his Directive No. 33, dated July 19, 1941.

After the fall of Kiev in September, the Fifth Army was finally destroyed and its commander, Maj. Gen. Potapov, taken prisoner. He did manage to survive the war in a POW camp. Lt. Gen. Kirponos, who so valiantly tried to shore up his crumbling Southwestern Front, was killed trying to break out of the same encirclement. General Rokossovsky came back through the same area in 1944, only this time his victorious T-34s were pushing the exhausted enemy troops westward toward Germany.

What was the reasoning of the Soviet High Command for so promiscuously using up five mechanized corps? Did the generals not realize the severity of the situation and futility of holding the forward positions? It is possible that the Soviet High Command, relying on incomplete or false information, was under the impression that this was not a major invasion but a border provocation? After all, the Soviet Union had fought two border conflicts against Japan in the late 1930s without either of them expanding into a full-scale war.

Perhaps the Soviet leadership realized the severity of the situation all too well, buying time to conduct full mobilization. Every day that the frontline echelons bought with their blood allowed reserves to be formed, armed, and sent into battle.

Perhaps the truth, as it is prone to do, lies somewhere in between. Either way, the tank battles in the “Bloody Triangle” demonstrated to the Germans that the Soviet Union was not a “giant with the feet of clay” after all. Even though the Fifth Army and the five Soviet mecha-



Stretching as far as the eye can see, dead Russian soldiers line a drainage ditch along a Ukrainian roadway.

nized corps did not accomplish their mission of destroying the German mobile group, they managed to slow the German offensive for nine days.

This delay, from June 24 to July 2, significantly disrupted the German timetable of operations in the Ukraine. After easy German victories in Western Europe, the tenacity of the Soviet soldiers and their willingness to dispute every inch of ground came as unpleasant surprise. A long and painful struggle loomed ahead. ●

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# The City That Would Not Die

IN ONE OF THE SADDEST CHAPTERS OF WORLD WAR II HISTORY, THE SIEGE OF LENINGRAD LASTED AN INCREDIBLE 900 DAYS.

*By Richard Rule*

Leningrad, the old imperial capital, was the most beautiful city in Russia and had for centuries been her cultural heartland. Founded as Czar Peter the Great's window on the West, it had known many agonies throughout its turbulent history, but in 1941 geography and pragmatic military strategy would see Leningrad

engulfed in a tragedy unparalleled in modern history.

With most of Europe already under the heel of Nazi Germany, Hitler turned his attention eastward toward the vast expanse of the Soviet Union and on the morning of June 22, 1941, launched Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of Russia. Spearheaded by three Army groups, German forces stormed across the Russian frontier and completely over-

whelmed the Red Army units in their path. With clinical precision, the world's largest army was being systematically annihilated and, after just 18 days of fighting, the Russians had lost over three million men, 6,000 tanks, and most of their aircraft.

The primary objective for 64-year-old Field Marshal Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb, commanding Army Group North,

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SS Polizei troops of the 4th Division during operations on the Leningrad Front.

was Leningrad; the assault on Moscow could not be undertaken until the city had been captured. Sweeping in a northeasterly direction from East Prussia, von Leeb's refined Blitzkrieg was proving a spectacular success. The speed at which his panzers had destroyed the Soviet forces in the Baltic region and closed on Leningrad was staggering. In just five days, they had covered half the distance to the city.

The Leningraders could not believe that the military threat had developed so rapidly. Most had expected the Red Army to throw the Germans back, including the city's Communist Party leader, Andrei Zhdanov. A direct assault on Russia's second largest city, inconceivable a week before, now seemed inevitable. Zhdanov girded the city for battle. The population was mobilized to dig air raid shelters, historic sites disappeared behind sandbags, anti-aircraft guns dotted the skyline, and massive evacuations commenced to ease the burden on the city's resources. Unfortunately, the evacuees were soon replaced with traumatized refugees streaming in from the west.

With a military catastrophe building on the approaches to Leningrad, 60-year-old Marshal K.Y. Voroshilov, hero of the Bolshevik Civil War, was named supreme commander of the Leningrad Front. He tried to restore order, but despite removing or executing many of his incompetent commanders, their replacements fared little better. They were inexperienced in the conduct of modern large-scale operations and it showed. The ill-trained and poorly

equipped Red Army continued to lurch from one disaster to another.

In desperation, a line of fortifications was to be built along the Luga River, 75 miles southwest of the city. Many firmly believed that the Luga Line was their last hope. If it collapsed, the city was lost. With most able-bodied men already fighting at the front, it was left to hundreds of thousands of women to create a fortified barrier nearly 200 miles long and between two and three miles deep laced with tank traps, gun emplacements, and trenches. Zhdanov, however, had little confidence that the shattered Red Army formations falling back on the city would rally to hold the new line. More men would be needed to bolster the defenses, and quickly.

Troops were drained from Russia's northern border with Finland to man the fortifications. In a drastic move, People's Volunteer Divisions comprising barely trained civilians were sent to fill the gaps in the line. With scarcely any modern weapons, most arrived at the Luga defenses with "empty hands and brave hearts," as one observer described.

PREDICTABLY, THE FIRST GERMAN ATTACKS took a frightful toll. Inexperienced and virtually leaderless, the volunteers were mowed down, but remarkably, they repeatedly held the line in spite of their grievous losses. This tenacious defense had been aided by dense forest and swamp-infested terrain, which had combined to severely



**The German war machine thrusts through the USSR. Von Leeb had to absorb Leningrad if he hoped to assault Moscow.**

hamper the German panzers and at last had thrown the blitzkrieg off pace. The city had been afforded valuable breathing space, but a new danger quickly emerged from another quarter. North of Leningrad, the Finns seized the opportunity to launch their own attack on July 31. With this new offensive steamrolling toward the city from the northeast and the Germans driving from the west, the Leningrad military command faced being cut off altogether.

The Finns pushed to within 20 miles of Leningrad's city limits, but much to Hitler's anger they halted and consolidated along their prewar lines with the Soviet Union. Hitler's belief that the Finns would join with him on ideological grounds for the drive on Moscow amounted to nothing and, in fact, they took virtually no further military action in the battle for Leningrad.

Relief in the north, however, did not ease the situation on the Luga Line in the west. Von Leeb, under pressure from Hitler to take Leningrad quickly, had reshuffled his forces and resumed his offensive on August 8. Twenty-nine German divisions divided into three battle groups slammed into the 15 battered Russian divisions that

opposed them. It was an unequal and costly struggle.

With the Luga Line creaking ominously, frantic efforts were made to find replacements. Prisoners of the NKVD, the Soviet secret police, were dragged from labor camps and forced into the front line with machine guns at their backs. The freshly raised 4th People's Volunteer Division, despite a lack of weapons, was ordered to immediately counterattack and was cut to pieces. Clearly the flesh and blood of regular army and volunteer divisions could only delay, not contain, this new German onslaught.

On August 13, von Leeb's troops captured the ancient city of Novgorod, effectively cutting the main Leningrad-Moscow highway. The battle for Leningrad, however, was going to be won or lost on the ramparts of the Luga defenses. It was here that German pressure was relentless, and it was here that the Russians had to hold—but they could not. Once the line began to crumble, it collapsed almost everywhere. Proclamations vowing immediate execution for anyone leaving the front were ignored as panic set in. Broken Soviet regiments retreated en masse, effectively leaving the whole approach to Leningrad open. By August 20, with the city seemingly within his grasp, von Leeb urged his men on: "One last push and Army Group North will celebrate victory."

On August 25, the Germans seized Chudovo on the main rail line between Moscow and Leningrad. Less than a week later they had captured the vital railway junction of Mga, followed soon afterward by Shlisselburg, situated on Lake Ladoga only 25 miles from Leningrad. By early September, the Germans had severed all of Leningrad's rail and highway connections with the remainder of Russia. The city was effectively cut off by enemy troops or water. The only contact with the outside was now by air or across Lake Ladoga.

The chain-smoking Zhdanov held the honorary rank of lieutenant general, but did not wear a uniform, preferring the traditional olive-drab party blouse. At the large party headquarters compound in Smolny, a few miles from the historic Winter Palace, Zhdanov worked tirelessly alongside Marshal Voroshilov in directing the defense of the city. Living on an endless supply of tea and very little sleep, the stocky Zhdanov could see that despite everything they had done, despite the immeasurable sacrifices of so many, the enemy was at the gates. There was no escape.

Stories of SS atrocities had already filtered through from the west, and Zhdanov had no doubt what awaited the population if the Germans broke into the city. He solemnly announced to a gathering of the party leadership



Both: National Archives

**TOP: Russian soldiers defend a barricade at Gatchina. ABOVE: Peoples Militia volunteers moving steadily to the front. Many of the volunteers were factory workers.**

that Leningrad would be defended, street by street, house by house. The people, he said, were to be prepared for a last-ditch battle within the city walls.

While one million civilians were put to work creating two concentric defensive perimeters around the city, internally Leningrad was divided into 150 small sectors, each to be defended by worker battalions armed with rifles, machine guns, pistols, swords, and pikes.

Frenzied activity saw dragon's teeth sown to block the passage of tanks, railway tracks were lifted and crisscrossed to form an iron jungle on the city outskirts, and pillboxes and gun emplacements sprang up in the southern suburbs. Stalin himself was now taking a keen interest in the city's defense measures. His secret police confirmed that not all would view German occupation as a disaster, and he suspected Leningrad might be turned over to the Germans without a further fight.

On the eve of the looming battle, and perhaps fueled by

Stalin's paranoia, a special commission arrived to provide advice and aid to Zhdanov and his military command. It was rumored that their real aim was to gauge the mood of the people and determine whether to defend Leningrad at all or divert forces to help deal with the increasing military threat to Moscow. In the wake of this commission, however, Zhdanov believed the city still had Stalin's support and he redoubled his efforts. Hundreds of miles of antitank barriers, barbed wire barricades, and trench systems were constructed. Large poles were erected in parks and open areas to wreck any attempted airborne landings and Molotov cocktails were mass-produced.

DESPITE THE ENORMOUS SCOPE OF THE WORK, many doubted the city would hold, including Stalin. The Russian dictator had in fact put into effect a top-secret alternative to rob the Germans of their prize. "Leningrad will be defended to the last possibility," he said. "But, if the Fascists break into the city, groups have been set up to destroy everything. All bridges, factories, institutions are to be mined ... not one ship, not one supply dump, not one cannon [will] fall into German hands ... all are to be destroyed." Stalin was determined to deny Hitler the opportunity to erase the cradle of Marxism. If it were to be destroyed, it would fall by the hands of its creators. Thus, at the very moment the population and military were making monumental sacrifices to save the city, secret preparations were being made to destroy it.

In a more low-key development, the Kremlin dispatched Dmitri Pavlov, a 36-year-old supply official, to the besieged city to address the looming food crisis. He found only enough food reserves on hand to feed the 3.5 million people for three to four weeks. With virtually no prospect of help from the outside, strict rationing enforced with an iron fist was the city's only chance. Restaurants were closed, food sales without ration coupons were halted, and the city was turned upside down in a search for more supplies.

The bewildered population could see that the war was going badly, but strict censorship was put in place to hide just how badly. The press and radio had fallen silent, and any news via the Soviet Information Bureau was vague at best. The deafening silence from the city's leaders fueled countless rumors that circulated rapidly throughout the city during those bleak, desperate days. Most were wildly inaccurate, but they found willing ears among people starved of information and fearful of German infiltration.

Leningrad was absorbing a steady flow of refugees from

many different backgrounds and cultures, and the possibility of civil unrest led Zhdanov to put military patrols on the streets and armed party members in factories and offices to maintain internal security and social order. The emergence of a fifth column could not be discounted.

The Germans were now perilously close and trains were no longer required to transport Soviet troops to the front, as many were delivered by the city's trams. With Army Group North maneuvering into position to storm the city, Hitler changed his mind. At the eleventh hour, he proposed downgrading the Leningrad front to a subsidiary theater of operations and bottling up the city rather than capturing it. He wanted to release units to the southern campaign against Moscow. Von Leeb, forewarned of what lay in store for his army, quickly had the necessary forces echeloned up to the Leningrad lines for his final assault. By the time any orders were received from Berlin, he would have eight divisions simultaneously smashing through the Soviet defenses and entering the city from both the southwest and southeast.

IN THE RUSSIAN CAMP, THE BUILDUP TO THIS final battle had driven the hapless Marshal Voroshilov to the brink of complete physical and mental collapse. He was unceremoniously replaced with Stalin's toughest commander, General Georgi Zhukov. Upon arriving in Leningrad, Zhukov immediately called Moscow. "I have taken over command," he announced tersely. "Report to the High Command that I propose to proceed more actively than my predecessor." With the German attack already under way, he hung up the phone and immediately went to work.

Zhukov, in the Stalinist mold, was ruthless during those critical September weeks, but it was what the situation needed. Undeterred by German units grinding their way to the city center, his orders were simple: Attack! Attack! Attack! His complete intolerance of failure reverberated down the chain of command. Timid or faltering commanders were sacked or executed; troops who left the line were shot.

The German attack had commenced with high expectations, but storming the city through a maze of obstacles and fixed fortifications had deteriorated into an exhausting, costly slog. The Red Army troops, fighting with fanatical zeal, refused to crumble as they had done elsewhere. The cost in Russian lives was scandalous, but the cold, hard facts were that Zhukov's uncompromising, draconian measures had worked. Von Leeb's forces had been



**German forces surround Leningrad, cutting supply lines and attempting total strangulation of the city.**

fought to a standstill at the very gates of Leningrad. His attempt to capture Leningrad by *coup de main* had foundered.

Despite Hitler's pathological hatred of the city and all it represented, the battle for Leningrad had gone on longer than anticipated. Changing military priorities would see von Leeb robbed of his prize and forced to relinquish his armor. He had run out of time.

The realization that German tanks were shifting away from Leningrad was greeted with rejoicing. With Wehrmacht troops now digging in for the winter, the offensive seemed over, and many believed Leningrad had been saved. The Germans, in fact, were far from finished with the city. Hitler was determined to destroy the birthplace of revolutionary communism and ordered von Leeb to closely blockade Leningrad and commence round-the-clock artillery and air bombardment to raze the city from the face of the earth. Any calls for surrender were to be

rejected. Under no circumstances was the German Army to be burdened with feeding the population. Hitler was adamant that the three million people trapped inside the city be left to fend for themselves through the winter. Their fate was a matter of complete indifference to him.

In many ways, the nightmare for Leningrad was only just beginning. The Germans brought up the largest siege guns in Europe, including 420mm railway guns, and day after day they systematically pounded the city into rubble. The Luftwaffe increased its attacks and, during one of the first air raids, set alight and destroyed more than 5,000 tons of food stored within the Badayev warehouses in the southwest corner of the city. For the population, it was a catastrophe. Until the arrival of Pavlov, Leningrad's authorities had done little about the diminishing food reserves. Neither Zhdanov nor his party leaders had seriously contemplated or prepared for the possibility of a winter siege. Now surrounded by the Germans and with food reserves already at a bare minimum, everything had changed. How were they to feed the millions trapped in the city? Zhukov, Leningrad's savior in September, was now leading the defense of Moscow, and it fell to Pavlov, the food specialist, to save the city. It was an onerous task.

Pavlov had the Badayev warehouses scoured for anything that might have survived, and the city was once again ransacked for supplies. Anything was considered, however unpleasant, provided it could be made edible. Thousands of tons of malt were salvaged from breweries and mixed with flour to make bread, oats for horse feed were seized and the horses slaughtered. Scientists worked tirelessly on a formula for digestible wood cellulose made from pine sawdust to add to bread.

The implications of such drastic measures were not lost on the city's population. They realized they were now facing an even crueler enemy, one completely devoid of mercy: famine. With the arrival of the first snow in mid-October, the specter of slow, lingering death by starvation loomed large on the horizon.

On November 8, the Germans captured the town of Tikhvin, which effectively severed the railway line used to bring supplies to Lake Ladoga for forwarding to Leningrad. It was a crushing blow. The nearest alternate depot, 220 miles distant, lacked a trafficable connection with the lake. A road network would need to be built through heavy swamp and forest. It would take time, but time was clearly running out.

With food becoming scarce, the privations began taking hold and people could see themselves changing, becoming



**Citizens flee as shells explode on Leningrad's main street, Nevsky Prospekt.**

National Archives

weaker, and wasting away. Supplies arrived sporadically across the lake, but their quantities were very small and German attacks soon sank most of the vessels involved. Pavlov had the rations cut again, this time to 10 ounces per day for workers, five ounces for the rest of the people. Only the Army and civilian volunteers were guaranteed sufficient food. The authorities knew the consequences of this action, but there was no alternative. With the stroke of a pen, the city's leadership had condemned thousands to death.

By November 11, the temperature had dropped to 15 below zero. Some thought the cold and snow would claim the battlefield and defeat the Germans as it had done Napoleon, but they failed to realize that it was likely to destroy Leningrad first. Fuel supplies for heating had run out, frozen pipes cut off running water, and what electricity there was had been diverted to the munitions industry which was still providing weapons for the front. The city may have been on the brink of starvation, but many were destined to freeze to death.

Next to food itself, a ration card became the most valuable item in Leningrad. Not having one was a virtual death sentence. The black market provided many illegal vouchers, forcing Pavlov to take drastic measures to ensure that every one in use belonged to the rightful owners. The clampdown uncovered more than 300,000 unauthorized cards. As the siege worsened, anyone caught using a forged card or one belonging to a dead relative faced possible execution.



National Archives

**A pile of corpses awaits transport to a mass grave. Citizens were so weak from starvation that many did not have the strength to move the dead.**

Most in Leningrad understood why supplies were so scarce and carried themselves with great dignity, courage, and compassion. They knew that no one could help them, and they tried to make rations go farther. Half the food they ate was nearly inedible. In spite of Zhdanov's security measures, the social fabric of the city was unraveling as gnawing hunger, bitter cold, and savage German shelling drove many to the brink of insanity. The people resorted to eating anything to fill their stomachs—wallpaper, leather, plaster, pets.

Throughout the city, gangs of murderers began roaming the streets targeting the old and frail for food and ration cards, but it was not only criminals and deserters who resorted to violence. With thousands of people dying of hunger every day, many decent citizens also found themselves capable of unspeakable acts to survive. One girl pulled out her dead father's gold teeth to barter for food. Trade in human flesh was not uncommon, and in an insidious development, small children were thought to have been kidnapped and eaten.

As the weeks passed without relief, people became susceptible to disease and quickly died. A bout of diarrhea was often fatal. Every day the temperature dropped and the number of corpses on the streets increased. There seemed to be a macabre order in which starvation gathered its grim harvest. Men would go before women, healthy people succumbed before the chronically ill, and the very young slipped away before the very old. "Today it is simple to die," wrote Yelena Skrybina. "You just begin

to lose interest, then you lie on the bed and you never again get up." A city of music, gaiety, and culture was rapidly being transformed into a massive frozen tomb from which there was no escape. A pall of utter despair had descended over Leningrad. The city of life was dying.

The Germans had methodically sealed off all land avenues and, as the days grew colder and food supplies dried up, Lake Ladoga offered the only hope of survival. When the lake finally froze, a road 20 to 30 miles long was built over it to bring in food from the outside. On November 20, the first convoy set out with 350 horse-drawn sleighs. Eventually, over one thousand sleighs would be utilized, but their cargo would barely meet Leningrad's needs. When the ice had hardened enough, convoys of trucks replaced sleighs, but many broke through the surface and sank.

Problems, delays, and mishaps continually beset the authorities as they attempted to maintain and improve the city's solitary lifeline. Aside from German attack and blinding blizzards, the major hurdle was the need to bypass Tikvhin via the arduous 220-mile route to the next railhead. This road, carved from the wilderness, was proving taxing on men and machines. In three days, more than 350 trucks were lost in one section alone.

The fate of millions rested with the ice road, or the "road of life" as it became known. The city, however, required a minimum of 1,000 tons of food a day and the road of life averaged barely a third of this.

TENS OF THOUSANDS WERE SOON BEING EVACUATED across the ice, which allowed more food for the rest, but in reality the people were still going to starve to death. It would just take a little longer. In November, 11,000 died and in December the figure rose to nearly 53,000, yet rations had to be brutally cut again. At this time, people began dying so quickly that mountains of bodies were soon choking the city. Graves were rarely dug as few had the strength to dig them, so thousands of corpses, often carried on children's sleds, were simply dumped in the snow, in the streets, or piled at the cemetery. Those who had transported the victims often fell dead themselves. Finally, Army sappers began to blow huge communal graves to accommodate the dead. Nonetheless, many would remain forgotten and unburied until the spring thaw.

Not even Hitler could possibly have imagined the depth of suffering these terrible extremes had unleashed, and there was no end in sight.

As 1941 came to a close, a glimmer of hope rose from



Supply trucks move across a frozen Lake Ladoga on a cold winter's night.

the tide of despair with news that Tikhvin had been recaptured by the Red Army, allowing the ice road to provide substantially more supplies. A further boost came with Zhukov's brilliant counterattack, which had thrown the Germans back from Moscow. There was even firm hope that a new and powerful relief offensive would soon smash through the German forces encircling the city. It was boldly predicted that by January 1, Leningrad would be liberated.

However, in a bitter reversal of fortune, the much-heralded offensive achieved little. The new German commander, General George von Kuechler, had ensured that his forces were securely dug in against Soviet troops who had neither the physical strength nor the weapons to dislodge them. News that the attack had failed saw the death toll begin to skyrocket. Many simply gave up.

The landscape of Leningrad had become a grotesque mosaic of death, destruction, and abject misery. German air raids ceased in January. They knew that hunger was doing their work for them, but the will to survive saw people struggle on despite the bestial conditions they endured. Scenes that would have deeply shocked citizens weeks before now barely warranted a second glance. It was just the way things were. There was no light, just death and snow. A diary entry from the period captured the mood of the times: "The city is dying as it has lived for the last half year—clenching its teeth."

The people knew that time was running out, but only a

very select few within the Leningrad command knew just how little time they actually had. Death and evacuations had certainly eased the number of people to be fed, but by January 1, 1942, instead of liberation, the city's inventory showed that Leningrad's food supply had virtually run out. They had never been so close to starvation. Zhdanov and his party elite's mood was grim. The fate of Leningrad hung by a thread, and unless radical measures were taken to obtain more food, this was the end. The entire civilian population would soon die—all 2.5 million of them.

The treacherous ice road held the key, but it was not working. In fact, it was close to complete collapse. The one-track rail line from Ladoga to Leningrad had become virtually inoperable due to a combination of heavy traffic, lack of fuel, failing equipment, and bad management. By early January, no trains were getting through at all. Zhdanov, ill and exhausted, recognized it was all or nothing and took firm action to get the system operational again.

The railroad director was shot for incompetence and replaced by the iron-fisted Maj. Gen. A.M. Shilov. With orders to have the shipments increased to 1,200 tons a day by any means necessary, Shilov saw to it that the target would be achieved. He immediately had road and traffic control systems improved. Antiaircraft batteries were set up to ward off German aircraft, and Zhdanov himself addressed the workers in a desperate appeal for a more sustained effort.

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Remarkably, the new measures began to have an effect. On January 18, shipments actually exceeded their quota, but for many the improved supply of rations came too late. Estimates vary, but is believed up to 124,000 people perished in January alone. Their bodies joined those already piled in the streets, courtyards, and the overflowing cellars.

The Germans tried to interdict the flow of supplies across the road with merciless air and artillery strikes, but failed. By February, Shirov's ruthless determination had the ice road at last functioning efficiently. Supplies of food and medicines were coming in ever-increasing numbers and evacuees were leaving in ever-increasing numbers, which collectively eased the strain on those who remained. Incredibly, people started to recover. Warmth was restored to their homes, food was available, and spirits lifted. They had survived and perhaps the worst was behind them. As winter drew to a close, the German blockade was still in place, but the ice road was now permanently entrenched. It had, in the end, been the salvation of Leningrad.

Power was restored and ties with the outside world were reestablished. By April, only 1.1 million people remained, but they would never again endure the privations experienced during the dreadful winter of 1941-1942. The city had indeed survived the terrible famine, and steps were taken to get Leningrad back on its feet. The first task was to remove the thousands of corpses and more than one million tons of rubbish to avoid the risk of epidemics.

The authorities instigated a massive clean-up operation in early March. It was a heartbreaking experience for the 300,000 Leningraders entrusted with the task. Whole families were discovered dead in their apartments. The bodies of loved ones were recovered from snowdrifts, while countless others would remain unclaimed. No one had survived to mourn them. The grief was simply overwhelming as the scale of the tragedy became tangible. Whole communities had simply vanished.

As the focus of the war shifted to more momentous operations in other cities and other battles in the south—Stalingrad, Kursk, Kharkov—the prospect of an all-out assault on Leningrad faded. Nonetheless, the city remained in the grip of the tight siege throughout 1942, and hardship remained a constant companion. German artillery continued to savagely pound the city, but having a permanent and well-defended supply route allowed life to return to something approaching normal. In the ensuing months, theaters and cinemas reopened and newspa-

pers were back in circulation. Pipeline and cable laid beneath Lake Ladoga provided fuel and electricity, while foodstuffs were gathered in advance for the rigors of the coming winter.

Battles of unimaginable ferocity would rage around the city for the next three years as Soviet and German forces furiously attacked and counterattacked. Through a combination of ruthless brutality, unconscionable indifference to losses, and fanatical force of will, the Soviets had thwarted every German attempt to capture the city.

By 1944, Army Group North, bled white in battle and harassed by ceaseless partisan operations, was in no condition to withstand a major attack. The Red Army had seized the strategic initiative and in January launched its winter offensive to drive the Germans from Leningrad. After days of heavy combat, Soviet troops finally succeeded in breaking the German stranglehold on the city. On January 27, 1944, after almost 900 days, the siege was lifted. The nightmare was over.

After three years of war, Leningrad bore little resemblance to the grandiose city of prewar 1941. Historic buildings had been destroyed, the streets were piled with rubble, and over 15 million square feet of housing lay in ruins. The human cost had been appalling. Yet, an exact figure is unknown. Western scholars believe it approached nearly 1.5 million, while Red Army losses were estimated to be in excess of 3.4 million.

Liberation for some brought temporary relief from scars that would never heal. Others felt elation and a rekindled love of life, but many were left harboring an unbearable sadness. They had lost everything that really mattered—their wives, their husbands, their children.

Despite Stalin's attempts to downplay the city's role in the Great Patriotic War, the devastating Battle of Leningrad stands as a lasting testament to the spirit, self-sacrifice, and heroism of the Leningraders themselves and the pivotal role they played in the war's final outcome. No city in modern times had ever suffered more, and never had a city's population risen in triumph over such overwhelming odds. "If you make nails of these people," one Leningrader wrote, "there will be no harder nails in the world." ●

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# Bloody Muddled Kursk

IN AN EFFORT TO TURN AROUND ITS FORTUNES IN RUSSIA, THE GERMAN ARMY THREW MUCH OF ITS BEST INTO THE KURSK SALIENT. THE RUSSIANS WERE WAITING FOR THEM.

*Jonas Goldstein*

When they invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, the Germans were confident of a swift victory over the Russian *untermenschen* (subhumans). But as Napoleon before them had discovered, the vastness of Russia and the fighting skills of her people, especially under able leadership, are formidable challenges. In 1941, the

original thrust of the Nazis was repelled before Moscow. In 1942 they were defeated at Stalingrad, and in the summer of 1943 there was the Battle of Kursk, an even more decisive setback for Hitler than his disaster on the Volga. This latter engagement has been termed history's greatest tank battle. Its dimensions stagger the imagination, and the tactics employed challenge the military mind.

It has always been a temptation to designate Stalingrad

as the turning point of World War II. But although this battle demonstrated a remarkable improvement in the operational skills of Soviet soldiers and weapons, it was only a part of a widespread campaign. At the same time, it must be realized that the German Army, though reduced in its military capabilities after its defeat on the Volga, was still a formidable force. This was demonstrated in mid-March 1943 when the Nazis recaptured the vital city of Kharkov.

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Russian soldiers advance beneath the fire support of one of their tanks. The Russians had planned a counterattack and made it fearsome.

A Tiger VI leads others of its kind toward Belgorod.



National Archives

As the front stabilized during spring 1943, the Soviet General Staff tried to determine the Germans' next move. The consensus was that the Kursk salient was the only place where the enemy was in position to launch an attack with any prospect of success. The concentration of panzer forces and infantry divisions around Orel and Kharkov hinted that these were the staging areas for the coming attack. The Soviets presumed that two heavy armored incursions north and south of the neck of the salient would attempt to converge and encircle the Soviet forces.

As Marshal Georgi K. Zhukov later wrote, "[The Germans] were in a position ... to mount a major offensive operation in the Kursk Salient Sector with the objective of trying to smash [Soviet] troops of the Central and Voronezh Fronts. This would change the general strategic situation in favor of the Germans, [because] the overall front line would contract considerably, thus increasing the operational density of German defense formations."

Zhukov continued: "Realizing that their Armed Forces had lost their erstwhile superiority over the Red Army, the Nazi military and political leadership undertook a [thoroughgoing] series of measures to muster for the Soviet-German front everything they possibly could. Thus, large contingents of picked troops were moved in from the west. The war industry worked round the clock to manufacture more of the new 'Tiger' and 'Panther' tanks and heavy

self-propelled 'Ferdinand' guns and also the Focke-Wulf-190A and Heinkel-129 aircraft. Considerable replenishments of personnel and *materiel* were provided."

FROM THE GERMAN SIDE, FIELD MARSHAL ERICH von Manstein wrote, "an attempt had to be made to strike the enemy a blow of limited scope before he could recover from his losses in the winter campaign and resuscitate his beaten forces. A suitable target was presented by the Soviet salient that protruded far into our own front line around the city of Kursk. The Russians facing the boundary between Central and Southern Army Groups had been able to retain this when the muddy season set in, and it now formed a jumping-off position for any attacks they might be contemplating against the flanks of the two German army groups. The appreciable Soviet forces inside the salient would be cut off if our attack were successful, and provided that we launched it early enough, we could hope to catch them in a state of unpreparedness."

Having surmised the Nazis' intentions, the next step for the Russians was to decide how to respond. Josef Stalin instinctively sought an offensive solution: an attack launched preemptively against German positions, followed by hot pursuit. Zhukov and the General Staff rejected this, and on April 8 the former suggested a plan that was adopted as Soviet strategy for 1943: Soviet forces



Signal Magazine

**German artillery counterattacks near Belgorod after a breakthrough by Russian tanks. In the foreground are Waffen-SS troops with Red Army prisoners.**

would meet the German offensive against Kursk with deep defensive lines aimed at debilitating the enemy's panzer forces, and then respond with a strong counteroffensive intended to thoroughly defeat the enemy. The Russians looked upon the Kursk salient as their springboard for the reconquest of Orel and Bryansk to the northwest and the Ukraine to the southwest. Accordingly, there were enormous Russian troop concentrations. Ever since March they had been fortifying the salient with thousands of miles of trenches, thousands of gun emplacements, and defenses along its north, west, and south sides stretching as deeply as 65 miles.

Zhukov insisted that the battle for Kursk be placed under the full control of the Supreme Headquarters; it was done. This was only part of the preparations. Zhukov wrote in his *Memoirs*: "After repeated discussions in mid-May 1943, Stalin firmly decided to meet the German offensive with fire from all types of depth-echeloned defenses and with powerful air attacks and counterblows from operational and strategic reserves to overcome the enemy completely, after wearing him down by a powerful counteroffensive in the Belgorod-Kharkov and Orel directions, and to subsequently undertake deep thrusting offen-

sive action in all the key directions."

Zhukov, who remained the chief architect of the campaign, was born in 1896, the son of a village cobbler. He was conscripted into the Imperial Russian cavalry in 1915 and joined the Red Army when it was created in 1918. During the 1920s and 1930s he pursued a conventional military career, rising in prominence as a combat commander. He had previously been instrumental in the planning of the Soviet victories before Moscow in 1941 and at Stalingrad in 1942.

By March 1943 Hitler was determined, for both political and economic reasons, to hold a front running from the Gulf of Finland down to the Sea of Azov, and to inflict a resounding defeat on the Russians at Kursk, thereby trapping vast numbers of the enemy and changing the strategic situation in the Germans' favor. A victory here might even facilitate a new offensive against Moscow. He felt that the operation would succeed, provided it was undertaken soon.

Indeed, on the northern shoulder of the region, General Walter Model's Ninth Army was poised to strike, but its operations were delayed due to the unfavorable condition of the terrain and the slowness with which the German

divisions were being replenished. In these circumstances General Model felt that the operation could not succeed without strong reinforcements by heavy modern tanks, superior to anything the Russians possessed. Based on Model's reservations, the attack was postponed until the middle of June, while a large number of new Tiger and Panther tanks and Ferdinand mobile guns were rushed from armament works in Germany straight to the front. Model had been commissioned into the German infantry in 1910, and served on the General Staff toward the end of World War I. An ardent Nazi, he served in Poland in 1939 and France in 1940 before taking over command of a panzer corps in Russia.

Field Marshal von Manstein felt that a delay until the start of summer would be disastrous, reiterating, "The whole idea had been to attack before the enemy had replenished his forces and got over the reverses of the winter. At the same time it was certain that the longer we took to launch the operation, the greater must be the threat to those of Southern Army Group's armies in the Donetz-Mius salient.... On 5th July the German armies were finally able to attack. Though every deception and camouflage measure had been taken, we could no longer expect to catch the enemy unawares after a delay of that length."

The main assault was delivered on the southern shoulder of the salient by von Manstein's Army Group South.



Russian soldiers near Kursk dig some of the 6,000 miles of trenches in the area. Three hundred thousand civilians also were put to work on the defenses.

During World War I, von Manstein had fought at Verdun and the Somme. An experienced officer, he served in Poland and the West during 1939 and 1940. He had then enjoyed outstanding success on the Eastern Front and was promoted to field marshal in 1942. His forces were instrumental in the recapture of Kharkov after the fall of Stalingrad.

COLONEL GENERAL HERMANN HOTH'S FOURTH Panzer Army in Army Group South consisted not only of the heavily equipped II SS Corps of three divisions, but

## THE INVASION OF SICILY

The necessity for another front as a diversion to German operations in the Soviet Union was early recognized by both the Western Allies and the Russians. British and American activity in North Africa had been effective, but not to the extent of severely straining the Nazi forces. It was the invasion of Sicily, with its threat to the Italian mainland, that forced Hitler to finally call off his Operation Citadel.

This island operation extended from the middle of July to August 17, 1943. The British and Americans heavily bombed enemy defenses, then 3,000 ships and landing craft ferried in 160,000 men with their 600 tanks, 14,000 vehicles, and 1,800 guns. The invasion was under the direction of Sir Bernard L. Montgomery and General George S. Patton. Cooperation between the Allied forces soon forced the Axis

from the island, on which they suffered 178,000 killed, wounded, and captured.

By the time Patton had occupied the port city of Messina, Field Marshal Albert Kesselring was able to evacuate 40,000 Germans and 60,000 Italian troops to the mainland. But by then the prime Allied objective was accomplished. Vital Nazi forces were diverted from the Soviet Front.



The Germans attacked from the north and the south in an effort to surround Russian forces and eliminate the Kursk salient. The Red Army was ready. **BELOW RIGHT:** Marshal Georgi Zhukov (left) was the major commander at Kursk. In the center is the chief of the Soviet General Staff, Aleksandr Vasilevsky.

also the XXXXVIII Panzer Corps, both of which were considerable threats to the Russians. But there were further delays by the Germans, caused by, among other things, Hitler's fear that Italy was on the point of dropping out of the war. When he finally was satisfied that Mussolini was not giving up, he decided to proceed with his original plan regarding Kursk. A victory here, he declared, would fire the imagination of the world. As spring gave way to summer, all the Nazi units had ample opportunity to make up their equipment shortages and organize effectively.

MEANWHILE, THE RUSSIANS UNDER ZHUKOV and Marshal Aleksandr M. Vasilevsky had not squandered their time. Nothing suited them better than having the Germans attack them at Kursk, where they were strongest. Soviet air and ground reconnaissance observed every detail of the German preparations. On the northern half of the Kursk bulge, Army General Konstantin K. Rokossovsky's Central Front—consisting of Lt. Gen. A.G. Rodin's 2nd Tank Army, Lt. Gen. N.P. Pukhov's 13th Army, and Lt. Gen. I.V. Galanin's 70th Army—was set to meet the main thrust of Model's Ninth Army.

In the south, the young Army General Nickolay F.

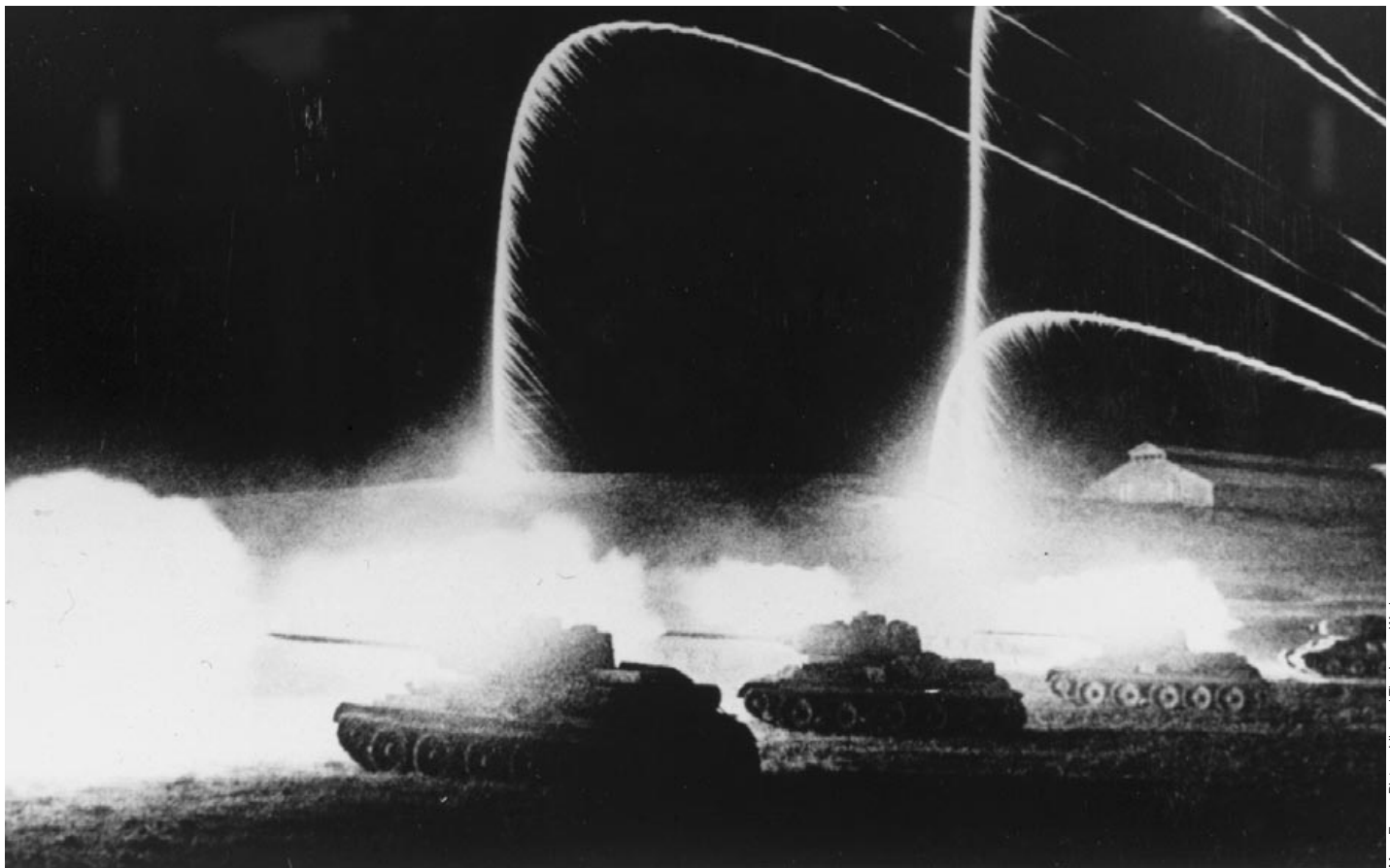
Vatutin, with Nikita S. Khrushchev as his political commissar, commanded the Voronezh Front waiting for the main German assault. However, the Russians did not rely upon this force alone to thwart a breakthrough. It was backed up by Marshal Ivan S. Konev's Steppe Front, which numbered 449,133 men. Konev was an experienced officer who had been conscripted into the Imperial Army in 1916 and after the Russian Revolution became a political commissar. He rose to a position of power as a colleague and sometime rival of Marshal Zhukov.

With these three segments, Soviet superiority in the Kursk region was 3:1 in manpower and 1.5:1 in armor.

While outnumbered, the German force was still powerful. It had 2,000 tanks in the vicinity of the salient, more than half of them in the southern sector commanded by General Hoth, and nearly 2,000 planes. With such heavy German concentrations, Hitler looked forward to the battle with great confidence. He was sure that the northern and southern striking forces would break through and close the ring east of Kursk.

After the delays imposed by armament and politics, the German attack—called Operation Citadel—was scheduled for the morning of July 5, 1943. Through defectors





Mary Evans Picture Library / The Image Works

**Signal flares rise over Soviet tanks as they advance in a night attack.**

and reconnaissance reports, the Soviet commanders were able to predict this attack to the minute. In fact, a half-hour before the German artillery was scheduled to begin firing, the Russians launched their own barrage against every area where the attackers were likely to assemble.

Contrary to Nazi expectations, their forces met with devastating resistance, even though their troops exerted themselves to the utmost. Their attacks continued to penetrate into the deep Russian defenses, but they suffered severe losses, and on July 7 the Russians threw in increasingly heavy tank forces. Even so, Hitler ordered the offensive to continue. On July 10, the Western Allies landed in Sicily, and he needed his “Kursk victory” more than ever.

In reality, after the Nazis’ initial tactical successes, the Battle of Kursk had come to a standstill. It reached its critical point on July 11 and 12, when Hoth, in charge of the southern German thrust, turned his panzer spearhead northeast to envelop the Soviet 1st Tank Army. After initial German success, the Russians counterattacked. Over 1,200 tanks on both sides were engaged in this struggle. The battlefield in the Prokhorovka area was compressed into a space of roughly three square miles. From the moment the leading elements of Soviet armor crashed

through the Germans’ first echelon, the commanders on both sides lost all control of their formations, and the battle became a confused free-for-all in which every tank fought individually amid a packed mass of armor. At practically point-blank range, the Tigers lost the advantages of armor and armament they enjoyed over the Soviet T-34s at longer range.

By the end of July 12, the area was a graveyard of burned-out Soviet and German tanks. While Hoth hoped to continue the attack east of Belgorod, Hitler at this time ordered von Manstein to begin withdrawing the II SS Panzer Corps from battle so that it could be moved west to deal with the deteriorating situation in Sicily. Von Manstein complied, and all German hopes for a renewed offensive, however unrealistic they may have been, evaporated.

Simultaneously on July 12 the Russian command struck toward Orel, in the rear of the German Ninth Army at the northern side of the salient. Then on July 13 Hitler reluctantly ordered Operation Citadel discontinued. This decision was further prompted by the Italians’ failure to defend Sicily as noted previously, and the possibility of having to send German reinforcements to Italy. Von

Manstein wrote: "On July 13, when the battle was at its climax and the issue apparently at hand, the commanders of the two army groups concerned were summoned to Hitler. He opened the conference by announcing that the Western Allies had landed in Sicily that day and that the situation there had taken an extremely serious turn.... Since the next step might well be a landing in the Balkans or lower Italy, it was necessary to form new armies in Italy and the western Balkans. These forces must be found from the Eastern Front, so Operation Citadel would have to be discontinued."

To this time, the Germans had no more than dented the Kursk salient by some 10 miles along a front of about 12 miles in the north, and by some 30 miles along a 30-mile front in the south. Approximately a hundred miles still separated the two German forces when the battle came to a standstill. Nearly the entire German panzer force had been destroyed.

Thus the initiative fell to the Red Army. Despite heavy losses, the Russian command was able to launch its summer offensive along a very broad front with superior forces. Von Manstein concluded, "And so the last German offensive in the east ended in a fiasco, even though the enemy opposite the two attacking armies of Southern Army Group had suffered four times their losses in prisoners, dead and wounded." This remained his assessment of the relative losses involved.

ON JULY 12, THE RUSSIAN OFFENSIVE AGAINST THE northern flank and the Orel salient began. It penetrated 30 miles in three days, while a second advance, which was more direct, drove to within 15 miles of the city. However, four of the panzer divisions that Field Marshal Kluge had disengaged came up just in time to stop the Russians'

northern wing from establishing itself astride the railway from Orel to Bryansk. Then the Russian offensive slowed, although superior numbers still forced the Germans back. It was a costly effort, but was helped by Rokossovsky's forces changing over to the offensive on the southern flank of the Kursk salient.

The Germans were finally squeezed out of Orel on August 5. Marshal Zhukov wrote, "The counter-offensive in the Kursk Sector had been planned well before the enemy attack. According to the plan endorsed by GHQ in May, we contemplated a counter-offensive in the Orel direction coded 'Kutuzov.' Its objective was to strike at the enemy's Orel [position], grouping three converging blows using the forces of the Central and Bryansk Fronts and the left flank of the Western Front." Orel had not only been one of the most formidable bastions of the German front since 1941, but while in Nazi hands, it was a threat to Moscow.

Meanwhile, General Nickolay Vatutin's troops had followed up the Germans' withdrawal from the breach on the southern side of the Kursk salient to the original line. On August 4, Vatutin launched an attack and captured Belgorod the next day. Exploiting the enemy's exhaustion, he drove an additional eight miles the next week, wheeling toward the rear of Kharkov. This maneuver opened up the prospect of dislocating the Germans' entire southern front.

Marshal Zhukov gets the last word: "The battle fought at Kursk, Orel and Belgorod was a cardinal engagement of the Great Patriotic War and World War II generally. This battle resulted not only in the annihilation of the enemy's strongest, handpicked groupings. It shattered the faith of the German people and Hitler's allies in the Nazi leadership, in Germany's ability to stand up to the ever increasing might of the Soviet Union." ●

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