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## Revisiting a "Lost Victory" at Kursk

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REVISITING A "LOST VICTORY" AT KURSK

A Thesis

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Louisiana State University and  
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## ABSTRACT

The battle of Kursk in the summer of 1943 was a pivotal battle of World War II. The defeat at Kursk placed the Wehrmacht on the permanent strategic defensive on the Eastern Front. The opening of the Soviet archives after 1989 has permitted more thorough analysis of that battle and produced greater appreciation of the Red Army's performance, while casting doubt on the notion that the Germans were close to an operational victory.

Preceding the clash, both sides prepared feverishly, attempting to bring the units involved to their maximum capability by replacing personnel, upgrading equipment, and conducting training. The Germans delayed the attack several times to deploy the new armored vehicles. Soviet leaders gathered intelligence from their own sources as well as from ULTRA, which was the codename for British intelligence gained from the German Enigma machine. The Soviets, in anticipation of the onslaught, built a massive and intricate defense.

Kursk began on July 4, 1943 with a German attack in the south to gain observation for artillery. The main battle began on July 5 when the Germans attacked both shoulders of the Kursk salient. The fighting was furious. In the north the frontlines quickly stabilized, but in the south German forces made progress. The critical moment occurred when they reached the village of Prokhorovka on July 12. The II SS Panzer Corps and the Soviet Fifth Guards Tank and Fifth Guards Armies fought to a tactical draw with hundreds of tanks lost on both sides. However, the Allied invasion of Sicily prompted Hitler to transfer panzer divisions from Kursk to the Mediterranean Theater, thus seriously reducing the assets available to Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, the commander of the German units in the south. This decision essentially ended the Battle of Kursk.

Had Hitler given his subordinates more freedom to destroy the Soviet armored reserves, they might have mitigated the catastrophe. But the Germans at Kursk could not have achieved victory. It was a simple matter of the Soviets outnumbering the Germans in all categories, and the Red Army had improved its capabilities to the point it could execute devastating deep, combined arms operations against the Wehrmacht.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

The largest tank engagement of World War Two occurred near the small town of Prokhorovka in the Ukraine in July 1943. This engagement was the culminating point of the German summer offensive codenamed Operation CITADEL. CITADEL's mission was to encircle the Red Army forces that were in the Kursk salient, which was a large area of Soviet controlled territory that thrust into German-held territory. In this region the front lines were not straight but curved, and this curvature provided both sides with opportunities to launch an offensive as well as defensive liabilities.

The Germans started the Battle of Kursk on July 4, 1943 on the southern half of the Kursk salient, but this was merely to gain better artillery observation points. The battle began in earnest early in the morning of July 5, when the Soviets conducted an artillery barrage before the Wehrmacht attacked. The Germans countered with their own planned barrages shortly thereafter and seized the initiative on both fronts. Their attacking forces met heavy resistance from the onset. The Red Army defenses were immense as it had months to prepare them. German infantry and armor continued to bludgeon their way towards the city of Kursk but forward progress was slow. The German northern wing slowed to a standstill, while the southern wing continued to make progress.

The fight on the German southern wing culminated with the battle of Prokhorovka on July 12. This action was a meeting engagement, which is a battle where both combatants are moving offensively and unexpectedly meet. The Soviet Fifth Guards Tank Army, which was advancing to the west, and the German II SS Panzer Corps, which was attempting to breakthrough to the northeast, were Prokhorovka's principle participants. This conflict was the

largest tank battle of World War Two. The result was a tactical draw, but Hitler called off the attack due to events in other theaters. From this point on Germany found itself on the strategic defensive, while Moscow began an offensive push that would culminate in the seizure of Berlin.

Most historians acknowledge Kursk as the swan song of German armored warfare. There are three reasons for this shared notion. The first is that CITADEL was the last time the Germans held the strategic initiative on the Eastern Front. Secondly, Soviet diplomats no longer demanded a second front from their Anglo-American Allies with the same vehemence as they had prior to the Battle of Kursk. Finally, the German panzer divisions never regained the relative or absolute strength they had enjoyed before the Battle of Kursk. Aside from this, historical interpretations of Kursk diverge sharply.

The interpretations of the Battle of Kursk fall into five schools of thought: the German, the Soviet, the Western prior to Ultra declassification, the modern mainstream, and the modern revisionist. Those who fought on the Eastern Front or were either ardent Nazis or Cold War Communists belong to the first two schools of thought. The last three schools formed as time elapsed after World War Two and as information became declassified and therefore available to historians.

The German school consists of individuals who believe that German failure at Kursk was not inevitable. For example, Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, commander of the forces in the south German sector during the engagement, stated that Hitler had stopped the attack too soon, a decision that he described as "tantamount to throwing away a victory."<sup>1</sup> On the contrary, research shows that the German forces could not have achieved Operation CITADEL's goal of a massive encirclement, let alone reduced the Soviet forces that would have remained in this

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<sup>1</sup> Erich von Manstein, Lost Victories: The War Memoirs of Hitler's Most Brilliant General, p. 449.



encirclement. The evidence does indicate, however, that Hitler placed too many restrictions on his subordinates and withdrew the best armored formations too soon. Von Manstein's statement is a perfect example of the German school of thought's inherent problem—rationalization and blame obfuscation.

The basis for the German view is a tendency of defeated people to rationalize when looking back at the previous war, instead of examining objectively the reasons for their failure whether personal or national. The German school of thought often tries to place the onus of Germany's downfall during World War II on Adolf Hitler's shoulders because of his “meddling” in the conduct of the war. Although there is some merit to certain points of this argument, its exponents seem to be trying to exonerate themselves and to deflect the blame from the rest of the German people, the German officer corps, the German armed forces, indeed, even Germany itself. In other words, this viewpoint attempts to romanticize and rationalize away the German reverse at Kursk and the destruction of the Third Reich in general.

Out of the German school of thought come many works on the crucial battle at Kursk and the earlier Battle of Stalingrad. Representative defenders of the German viewpoint are Erich von Manstein, Martin Caidin, Paul Carrell, and F. W. von Mellenthin, among others.<sup>2</sup> Because of their personal biases and outright attempts to pass on the blame for the failure of CITADEL and the war, their arguments and their information require cautious reading. They do make two valid points. First, Hitler waited far too long to execute Operation CITADEL, and, second, von Manstein's desire to keep attacking when Hitler ordered the end of the attack was the correct one, as German armored forces could have completed the destruction of the Soviet armored reserves. What von Manstein and the other proponents of this school do not adequately explain is how this

feat of arms would have been achieved, nor do they explore the strategic-operational ramifications of continued attack while the Soviet counteroffensives that were occurring in the Orel bulge and along the Mius River.

The Soviet view lies at the other end of the spectrum—the Germans were doomed to fail at Kursk from the beginning. These historians, for their own or their regime's political purposes, heavily edited the writings of Marshal Konstantin Rokossovsky, Marshal Sergei Shtemenko, Major General Pavel Rotmistrov, Marshal Georgi Zhukov, and other wartime leaders. Zhukov, in fact, found himself completely written out of official Soviet history, redeemed, and then again ignored as his political fortunes waxed and waned during the decades following World War Two.<sup>3</sup> Thus, like the German school, Soviet interpretations rest on ulterior motives and reflect a shameless skewing of facts by Soviet officialdom. Yet, many Soviet authors actually believed that CITADEL's failure was not a foregone conclusion, that Soviet chances of victory improved after each instance of German hesitation, and that the outcome of the battle was uncertain until after the tank battle of Prokhorovka. Nevertheless, the Communist Party kept these views from reaching the Soviet general population.

The view of Western historians such as Geoffrey Jukes, Alan Clark, John Erickson, and Earl Ziemke who wrote prior to ULTRA declassification was somewhat distorted but not nearly as egregiously as that of the Cold War Soviet historians.<sup>4</sup> ULTRA was the Anglo-American codename for intelligence material gleaned from deciphered secret German Enigma radio

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid; Martin Caidin, The Tigers Are Burning; Paul Carell, Hitler Moves East, 1941-1943; F. W. Mellenthin, Panzer Battles: A Study of the Employment of Armor in the Second World War.

<sup>3</sup>Konstantin K. Rokossovsky, A Soldier's Duty; Pavel Rotmistrov, Main Front: Soviet Leaders Look Back on World War II; "Tanks Against Tanks," Sergei M. Shtemenko, The Soviet General Staff at War 1941-45; Georgi K. Zhukov, Marshal Zhukov's Greatest Battles; Otto Chaney, Zhukov, pp. 368-271, 387.

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Jukes, Kursk: The Clash of Armour; Alan Clark, Barbarossa: The Russian-German Conflict, 1941-1945; John Erickson, The Road to Berlin: Continuing the History of Stalin's War with Germany; Earl F. Ziemke, Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East.

transmissions. The German High Command used Enigma-based ciphers to send instructions via radio to units outside Germany, which included U-boats, the Afrika Korps, and others. Without the knowledge of ULTRA's existence and the Allied governments' prohibition on the discussion of this material, the victory at Kursk appeared even more of a decisive Soviet military accomplishment than it was, just as the Allied victories of the Battle of Britain, the Battle of the Atlantic, Sicily, Normandy, and the pursuit across France seem less feats of arms than of intelligence. In other words, the decisions that seemed to be so insightful and military strength that seemed to be so pervasive are not nearly as impressive with the understanding that one side knew the other's plans. Because of this, the works written by Anglo-American historians before 1974, when Ultra was declassified, made the Soviet leaders appear more insightful in their course of action and the combat capabilities of the Red Army seem greater during the summer of 1943 and made the Battle of Kursk's outcome appear to be a clear foregone conclusion.

Modern mainstream historians argue cogently that Operation CITADEL was a great gamble, but if the Germans had executed it as originally planned, they might have pinched off the salient and destroyed a significant grouping of Red Army forces. Robin Cross, David Glantz, Jonathan House, and Mark Healy are some of the authors who fall into this category, and they are the proponents of the most reliable and balanced view of this titanic battle.<sup>5</sup> These same historians agree that Hitler's decision to stop the battle was the correct one and that continuing the attack would have been militarily unfeasible. This school of thought views von Manstein's criticism of Hitler's decision as partly postwar recrimination and partly blame obfuscation.

The modern revisionist school holds that the Germans were closer to victory on the southern axis than previously thought. The best example of an author who maintains this view is

George Nipe. In a detailed analysis of the Battle of Kursk, he argues that von Manstein, given a free hand by Hitler, could have achieved much more than he did.<sup>6</sup> Nipe and like-minded authors base their case in part on the Germans' better tank killing ratio and the availability of uncommitted German reserves that might have turned the tide. In their opinion, this would validate von Manstein's criticism of Hitler's decision and, consequently, vindicate von Manstein. This, however, fails to examine the Soviet side of the equation. Specifically, their argument neglects issues such as the uncommitted Soviet reserves available, the effect of Red Army actions outside of the Kursk salient, and the successful Central Front defense against the German Ninth Army on the northern axis.

Overall, the evidence suggests that neither Hitler nor Field Marshal Erich von Manstein were completely wrong. Hitler was right to stop further penetration into Soviet territory, but he should have given von Manstein more freedom to execute operations as he saw fit and to finish the battle in as favorable a fashion as possible. Von Manstein, on the other hand, was incorrect in believing that he could salvage a German strategic victory out of the situation on July 13. Indeed, there was no chance of such an outcome once Hitler delayed Operation CITADEL until June 4, 1943

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<sup>5</sup> Robin Cross, Citadel: The Battle of Kursk; David M. Glantz and Jonathan M. House, The Battle of Kursk; Mark Healy, Kursk 1943: The Tide Turns in the East.

<sup>6</sup> George M Nipe, "Kursk Reconsidered: Germany's Lost Victory?" World War II Articles 1998, <http://www.thehistorynet.com/WorldWarII>.

As a whole, there was potential to end the Battle of Kursk in a manner more favorable to the German cause if Hitler had allowed von Manstein to conclude the battle at an operational level a strategic victory.

## CHAPTER 2

### STRATEGIC SITUATION AND PLANS

In the spring of 1943, the Soviet and Nazi High Commands planned to renew operations as soon as the muddy ground and weather allowed offensive movement. The Germans had just proved how resilient they were after von Manstein's counterattack successfully pushed the Soviets out of Kharkov and east of the Donets River. At the same time, the Soviets were looking to renew the expulsion of the fascist invaders to the west. Both assessed their situation and made plans for the summer of 1943. The Soviets decided to adopt a strategic defensive that would be followed by massive counterattack, where the Germans decided to adopt a strategic offensive that would be followed by a strategic defensive.

The strategic situation appeared to be that the Axis had reached its high tide in 1942 and was showing distinct signs of ebbing in 1943. Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Imperial Japan, however, were far from beaten. Many months had to pass, many battles had to be fought, and many lives had yet to be lost in order to defeat the Axis's combined strength of arms and will. The year of 1943 would begin with the Axis and the Allies vying for strategic initiative, but by the beginning of 1944 the initiative was firmly in the hands of the Allies across the globe.

In the naval arena the Allies had essentially won the Battle of the Atlantic by the summer of 1943. The Anglo-American anti-submarine warfare effort had grown continually in personnel, equipment, and technology. The U-boat arm of the German Navy could not keep pace with the combined American and British shipbuilding industries, the proliferation of sonar, and the increasing air coverage provided by escort carriers and land-based aircraft. The result was that in 1943 Germany lost 237 U-boats and had only 272 enter service. Therefore, the

Battle of the Atlantic was clearly going in the Allies' favor by the time of CITADEL's execution, but the U-boats continued to tie down Allied naval resources for some time.<sup>1</sup>

Anglo-American strength also was growing in the British Isles in preparation for a cross-channel invasion. The British, using primarily one Canadian Infantry Division, had executed a raid at the French port of Dieppe in August of 1942 with disastrous results. Despite the heavy cost, there were many valuable lessons that helped shape plans for future invasion of France. Partly from this raid, Hitler knew that there was a growing possibility of a cross-channel invasion, and he ordered the fortification and reinforcement of the French coastline against this contingency. Thus, the mere threat of invasion drew precious German resources to both the Atlantic Wall and to the Mediterranean Theater and away from the Eastern Front.

Allied bombing efforts increased the pressure on Germany as well. The U.S. Army Air Corps staged its first daylight bombing operation in January 1943, and the RAF resumed night bombing but with four-engine bombers instead of the smaller two-engine bombers.<sup>2</sup> This Allied bombing offensive drew vital German fighters and supplies, especially fuel, away from the war with the Soviet Union. As the aerial bombardment continued, many German soldiers and citizens came to realize that they were not winning the war and Hitler was indeed fallible.

The fortunes of the Axis continued their downward spiral in Africa early in 1943. General Erwin Rommel's Africa Corps had already retreated west from Egypt under heavy pressure from General Montgomery's Eighth Army. After November 1942, the Africa Corps also had to fight the American forces that had landed in French North Africa. Because of the American landing, Hitler had dispatched five divisions to North Africa. This reinforcement

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<sup>1</sup> H. P. Willmott, The Great Crusade: A New Complete History of The Second World War, p. 268.

<sup>2</sup> Gerhard L. Weinberg, The World At Arms: A Global History of World War II, p. 360; Earl F. Ziemke, Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East, p. 119.

stabilized the situation until both the American and British forces were able to attack simultaneously, slowly strangling German and Italian forces in Tunisia with a ground, air, and naval cordon.

Axis troops in Tunisia surrendered in May 1943, and this constituted a heavy loss of well-trained men and of materiel, especially new tanks. A total of 93,000 Germans and 182,000 Italians laid down their arms at "Tunisgrad," which was how many of the German soldiers referred to the defeat at Tunis. In numbers of men and volume of equipment, the downfall at Tunis was roughly of the same order as the Axis defeat at Stalingrad.<sup>3</sup> The magnitude of that defeat was a result of Hitler's folly in insisting on sending troops to Africa while the Axis was steadily losing control of the Mediterranean Sea. The end result was that the "soft underbelly" continued to yield to Allied advances and would lead to the Anglo-American invasion of Sicily, codenamed Operation Husky, in July.

On the Russo-German front the line of contact was nearly identical to what it had been in the summer of 1942—a line running through Leningrad, Velikiye Luki, Orel, Belgorod, Voroshilovgrad, and Rostov with the addition of the Taman bridgehead. The major differences were large salients in the central and southern regions. The two most important of these bulges centered on Orel and Kursk. Because the shape of the front lines in these two areas, they were natural points of attack.<sup>4</sup> The Kursk salient presented offensive opportunities to the Germans, as it was a large area vulnerable to a double envelopment striking its respective shoulders. From the Soviet point of view, the Orel salient that the German Ninth Army held was vulnerable to a

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<sup>3</sup> Willmott, *Great Crusade*, pp. 199 and 240; Weinberg, *The World At Arms*, p. 431.

<sup>4</sup> Robin Cross, *Citadel: The Battle of Kursk*, p. 22. A salient provides an attacking force the advantage of easier encirclement than does a linear front. This is because the attacker can strike both "shoulders" of the salient, penetrate on both sides, and link up his forces at the base of the bulge in the front lines. However, an "S" in the front provides the enemy the same benefit if he is attacking, as there is a vulnerability from either point of view. The force that manages to seize the initiative holds the advantage.



similar attack. Hence, the shape of the front presented both the Wehrmacht and the Red Army with an opportunity for a double envelopment and the destruction of enemy forces that this form of attack inherently offers.

The combat strength of the opposing armies was also very different from the previous two years of conflict. The Wehrmacht no longer had the superiority of material and skill to mount grand, front-wide offensives as they had in the previous two summers. Too many casualties among the experienced soldiers and an influx of lower quality replacements had diluted the overall effectiveness of the German Army. The German High Command had taken steps to improve the situation by producing better tanks, such as the heavy Tiger tank and the medium Panther tank, but this was still only a technological stopgap solution to a larger manpower problem. The Soviet Union's military had grown into a powerful and skilled enemy after the first two years of fighting. The period of mass surrenders and ineffectual, uncoordinated attacks was over by 1943. The Red Army now consisted of armored forces capable of deep offensive operations, durable infantry, and abundant artillery that could launch vast numbers of rockets and shells against the German forces. Marshal Tukhachevsky's deep operational theories were bearing theoretical, organizational, and technological fruit.<sup>5</sup>

Both Stalin and Hitler strove to find a way to defeat their enemy and turn the war in their favor. Hitler wanted to win a major battle that would "be a beacon to the world."<sup>6</sup> To this end, he needed this battle to achieve three objectives: keep the Soviets from taking the initiative,

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<sup>5</sup> Cross, Citadel, pp. 65-68; David Glantz and Jonathan House, The Battle of Kursk, pp. 273 and 280-281. Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky was the progenitor of the Soviets' deep operations theory and the idea of the operational level of war, which was distinct from tactics. Tukhachevsky's deep operations theory also revolved around three operational stages in time and space as well as synergy of force. The first stage was penetration by an infantry-oriented combined force of the tactical outer layer of the enemy's defense, the second stage consisted of the breakthrough of the defender's operational depth by an armored force, and the third stage concerned the rout of the defender beyond his operational depth. Tukhachevsky worked on his theories during the late 1920s and 1930s. Stalin ordered his execution due to his influence on the Red Army. Shimon Naveh in Stalin's Generals, pp.272-73.

damage the Red Army to an extent that would make up for the Stalingrad debacle, and shorten the German defensive line. He and his staff put much effort into setting the conditions to bring about a victory with the magnitude to meet Hitler's three objectives. Stalin, on the other hand, wanted a victory that would turn the tide his favor once and for all. He had thought his military forces had reached that point during both the Battle of Moscow and the Battle of Stalingrad, but the Wehrmacht had bounced back on both occasions. Additionally, von Manstein's surprise counterattack that sent a pursuing Red Army reeling after Stalingrad was a demonstration of the German Army's recuperative powers. Stalin deemed von Manstein's counteroffensive so successful that he thought the war would continue for the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, he pushed his officers to come up with a plan to defeat the German forces arrayed against him.

Hitler's overall vision for German operations for 1943 consisted of two general phases. The first step was to consolidate the front by executing several small-scale offensive operations to straighten the front lines. Following this spring consolidation in the central and southern sectors, the second phase would begin with an offensive by German and Finnish forces that would finally take Leningrad. Timing was crucial element for the success of Hitler's plans. Any major deviation from the summer time table would result in the delay or cancellation of the attack upon Leningrad in late 1943.

To meet the objectives of the first phase of Hitler's plan the OKW and the OKH came up with three possible courses of action for consolidation in the south. Codenamed HAWK, PANTHER, and CITADEL, they all involved the execution of the Kesselschlacht or the classic double envelopment maneuver. Each was an offensive with the objectives of destroying Soviet forces, protecting the Donets Basin resources, and shortening the front lines. Historians and

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<sup>6</sup>Adolf Hitler, "Operations Order No. 6 (Citadel) of 15.4.1943," in Glantz and House Kursk, pp. 356-60.

participants alike think that the 1943 plans would have had a chance of success. The three operations were "conceived as part of a coherent and not unpromising strategy that envisioned a series of limited offensives to consolidate German defenses."<sup>7</sup> However, timing and rapid success were very important to the overall plans fruition. Von Manstein stated that a German offensive "must be made to strike the enemy . . . before he could recover from his losses in the winter campaign."<sup>8</sup> Operation CITADEL was the most ambitious of the three proposed operations, as it was supposed to reoccupy the entire Kursk salient and destroy Soviet forces on the scale of the 1941 Kiev operation. Colonel-General Kurt Zeitzler the Chief of Staff of the German Army High Command, or the OKH, created CITADEL's the plan of operations.

Operation CITADEL appealed to two of Hitler's major interests: a grandiose offensive goal and new wonder weapons. CITADEL's objectives were grandiose because of the relative balance in combat power between the Red Army and the Wehrmacht and the many delays in launching the operation gave the Red Army plenty of time to prepare. Due to delays, the German Army would be facing a battle-hardened and dug-in Red Army and not the unprepared and poorly led Soviet troops that they faced during the invasion in 1941. Hitler's expectations of his forces to defeat the Soviets on the scale of 1941 were consequently preposterous. Similarly, the notion that the Germans could form large reserves after penetrating, isolating, and reducing the massive Soviet prepared defense was equally improbable. Hitler also hoped to compensate for the German relative numerical parity with technologically advanced weapons he loved so much, most notably the Panther tank and Elephant tank destroyer. Hitler's reliance on and trust

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<sup>7</sup> Ziemke, Stalingrad to Berlin, pp. 124-127. HAWK was originally HABICHT in German and CITADEL was similarly ZITADELLE in German.

<sup>8</sup> Erich von Manstein, Lost Victories: The War Memoirs of Hitler's Most Brilliant General, p. 446; Martin Caidin, The Tigers Are Burning, p. 22.

in the power of new technology would prove to be misplaced throughout the war, as he would continue to count on wonder weapons to turn the tide against the Allies until the very end.

There were also two main political issues that influenced Hitler's decision to execute Operation CITADEL. First, Hitler "assumed that successes in the East would rattle the very foundations of the Allied coalition, causing it to disintegrate under pressure from Soviet dissatisfaction at American and British delays in opening a second front."<sup>9</sup> However, it is very improbable the alliance would have disintegrated had CITADEL succeeded. Second, the operation was the brainchild of General Zeitzler, and Zeitzler was one of Hitler's "favorites." In fact, Hitler had already promoted him to Chief of Staff over scores of more senior officers. Because "his" general came up CITADEL, Hitler hoped to win a great victory using "his" plan. Thus, he wanted victory with a plan designed by one of his "own" generals and not conceived by the old corps of German generals.

There were several military issues that also influenced Hitler's decision to execute CITADEL. First, he knew that the summer of 1943 might be that last time the Axis could attack in the east without the threat of an invasion of Western Europe. This threat lent impetus to Hitler's predilection for offensives that gave him the strategic outcome he desired, and this was offensive in this mold. Hitler also leaned toward Operation CITADEL as he did not have to wait for Stalin to oblige him by launching an offensive, as Germany's dictator naturally desired to seize the initiative whenever possible whether prudent or not.<sup>10</sup> Hitler and his staff envisioned

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<sup>9</sup> Rudolf Lehmann, *The Leibstandarte III: 1 SS Panzer Division Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler*, III, 201; Christopher Ailsby, *SS: Hell on the Eastern Front: The Waffen SS War in Russia, 1941-1945*, p. 69. Hitler believed that a success against the Red Army would exacerbate Stalin's dissatisfaction with the Anglo-American delays in opening a second front on the European Continent proper. Thus, Hitler hoped that a major Soviet defeat coupled with a lack of an Allied attack on the European continent would end the cooperation between the Soviet Union and the of the Anglo-American Allies.

<sup>10</sup> Theodor Busse, *Zitadelle Offensive*, pp. 8-10. Hitler knew that the Anglo-American invasion was only a matter of time due to their victories in Africa and the well-known American desire for a cross-channel invasion.

that CITADEL executed in the spring would allow the final attack on Leningrad; thus, his desire to seize Leningrad also played a part in his decision for CITADEL. The German High Command similarly hoped that CITADEL and the seizure of Leningrad would stabilize the entire Eastern Front and allow Germany to create sufficient reserve forces to parry any Soviet offensives or any invasion elsewhere.<sup>11</sup> The overarching military purpose of CITADEL was to "render the enemy incapable of a decisive offensive for the entire summer."<sup>12</sup>

Hitler based his decision on inept tactical, operational, and strategic intelligence gathering operations as well. The German intelligence corps often incorrectly analyzed the data they had gathered, and, to make matters worse, Hitler usually ignored any intelligence data that contradicted his intuition. He also severely rebuked nearly all that promulgated any views contrary to what he believed, which resulted in a very skewed analysis. Furthermore, the Soviets were very adept at both intelligence and counterintelligence operations; consequently, the German intelligence gathering efforts were often based on Soviet deception measures or were incomplete.

Once Hitler had confirmed the execution of CITADEL, the OKH planned to attack in the spring after the ground had dried sufficiently to allow good off-road mobility and permit rapid motorized transportation. The date was set for March 13, 1943 with Field Marshal Erich von Manstein's forces attacking the southern face of the Kursk salient and General Walter Model's

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Also, a defensive-offensive operation is one that starts on the defense and then transitions to the offense when the enemy no longer has the strength to attack and is ripe for a successful counterattack.

<sup>11</sup> Weinberg, *A World At Arms*, p. 601.

<sup>12</sup> Rudolf Lehmann, *The Leibstandarte III: 1 SS Panzer Division Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler*, III, 201; Christopher Ailsby, *SS: Hell on the Eastern Front: The Waffen SS War in Russia, 1941-1945*, p. 69.

Ninth Army attacking the northern face. To allow Model sufficient forces to attack, the OKH ordered his Ninth Army to evacuate the Rzhev salient.<sup>13</sup>

From the Soviet point of view, Stalin's intent was to begin the final and irresistible expulsion of the Fascists from Russian soil and subsequently end their occupation of all Soviet territory. The operations during the summer of 1943 were to usher in this phase. Stalin wished to attack in the Ukraine as he had the previous summer but on a larger scale. Marshall Zhukov did not agree. He wished to fight on the defensive initially and then counterattack just as the Red Army had successfully done at Moscow and at Stalingrad.

Intelligence had a significant impact on the strategic difference of opinion between Stalin and Zhukov. The British gave the Soviets ULTRA information shortly after the Germans had sketched the execution of CITADEL, which included nearly the entire plan of operations. Stalin was willing to trust British intelligence in 1943, unlike in 1941 when the British warned him of the imminent German attack because he suspected the British of trying to draw the Soviet Union into the war with Germany. The Soviets also had their own successful intelligence-gathering machinery, the most important of which was the LUCY spy ring. As a whole, these sources corroborated the British ULTRA intelligence, and Stalin chose to heed what the British and Soviet sources were telling him, which was so unlike his treatment of the intelligence indicators before Operation BARBAROSSA and Operation BLUE.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Zeimke, *Stalingrad to Berlin*, pp. 115-117. Once Hitler gave Army Group North permission to evacuate the Demyansk pocket, Ninth Army holding the Rzhev held no purpose. Hitler agreed with Field Marshal Gunther von Kluge's proposal to straighten the front through a withdrawal. The Wehrmacht completed this withdrawal by 23 March 1943, and it shortened the front from 340 miles to 110 miles. This shortening of the lines increased the density of the defense and freed up forces to act as reserves.

<sup>14</sup> Geoffrey Jukes, *Kursk: The Clash of Armour*, pp. 45-47. The LUCY spy ring was a massive network of spies that included many Germans who held important positions within the Nazi regime but did not agree with the Nazi Party's policies. Operation BARBAROSSA was the German invasion of the Soviet Union and operation BLUE was the German summer offensive of 1942. The British had attempted to warn Stalin, but he refused to believe the intelligence data.

Stalin had slowly learned to trust his subordinate commanders and staff over the course of the Russo-German War. This was especially true of Zhukov, who continued to demonstrate his value and acumen as the war progressed. Even more importantly, Stalin had learned to curb his predilection for a general offensive and for blindly holding onto terrain. He now was willing to wait for the Germans to reach their culminating point and then launch a devastating counterattack, which was the modus operandi adopted in the successful defense of Moscow and Stalingrad.<sup>15</sup> Stalin also understood the value of allowing his troops to avoid encirclement in order to live to fight another day. Because Stalin believed the intelligence data that the Germans would attack, he backed Zhukov's plan of a strategic defensive followed by counterattacks. Thus, Zhukov managed to convince him to stay on the defensive within the Kursk salient, station massive reserve formations within operational distance to affect the battlefield, and then execute devastating counterattacks on the flanks of the German spent attacks. With this concept in mind, members of the Soviet High Command, or the Stavka, planned the details to initially to defend in-depth and then mount a massive counterattack.

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<sup>15</sup> Georgi Zhukov, Marshal Zhukov's Greatest Battles, p. 210.

## CHAPTER 3

### PREPARATION

After deciding on their course of action, the Red Army and the Wehrmacht began to prepare to execute their respective summer operations. However, both the Axis and the Soviet forces had suffered immensely in the previous two years, but both were able to muster their best units, men, and equipment for the campaign in the Kursk region. The German forces involved were, in some ways, the finest the Third Reich would field during the war. Indeed, "[the] state of training, equipment, and morale of the units earmarked to participate in the attack was brought to the highest peak ever reached heretofore and thereafter during the entire Russian Campaign."<sup>1</sup> On the Soviet Union side, the leaders who were in charge of the defense and counterattack during the Battle of Kursk were battle tested and would continue to build the Red Army into one of the most powerful in history.

The German forces that participated in the attack consisted of most of the strategic reserve—seventeen panzer and twenty-three infantry divisions. Furthermore, two reinforced air armies, representing approximately two-thirds of the Luftwaffe's aircraft in the east, were to support the ground units. The overall German force consisted of approximately 10,000 guns, 2,700 tanks, 2,000 aircraft, and 900,000 men. The Ninth Army commanded by Field Marshal Walther Model, which was part of Field Marshal Gunther von Kluge's Army Group Center, was to attack the north face of the Kursk salient on the axis of Orel-Kursk. Colonel General Ritter von Greim's Sixth Luftflotte, or air group, was to support this attack. Meanwhile, Colonel General Hermann Hoth's Fourth Panzer Army and Army Group Kempf, which were part of von Manstein's Army Group South, were to attack the southern face of the salient. General Otto

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<sup>1</sup> Busse, Zitadelle, pp. 19-20.



Dessloch's Luftflotte Four was to support the southern assault group from the air.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the large number of units involved indicates that the Nazi leaders considered the outcome of the battle essential for the future of the Third Reich.

The Soviets also realized the importance of the coming battle and planned accordingly. Zhukov's overall concept for Kursk called for a defense in depth followed by a massive counterattack when the Wehrmacht was vulnerable. To this end, vast numbers of men and equipment moved into the area. The Red Army forces in the Kursk and Orel region reached approximately 1.3 million men, 75 infantry divisions, and 3,500 tanks and self-propelled guns. The Stavka further augmented these formations with 20,000 artillery pieces and 2,400 aircraft, which meant that the initial number of Soviet personnel in theater was 66 percent higher than that of the Germans. Zhukov broke these forces into three Fronts, whose area of operations lay astride the expected major axes of attack.<sup>3</sup> He positioned the Central Front under the command of General Konstantin Rokossovsky in the north and the Voronezh Front under the command of General Nikolai Vatutin in the south. Zhukov placed the Steppe Front commanded by Colonel General Ivan Konev to the east of the Kursk salient. The Steppe Front was to act as a strategic and operational reserve. More specifically, Konev's mission was either to reinforce during the defensive phase of the battle or to attack in a counteroffensive role depending on the course of the upcoming battle.<sup>4</sup>

The Wehrmacht ensured that there was thorough training of officers and non-commissioned officers prior to the battle.<sup>5</sup> Hitler knew he needed a victory; consequently, he brought his most able and most reliable officers to crush the Kursk salient. As always, he

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Healy, Kursk 1943: The Tide Turns in the East, p. 20; Glantz and House, Kursk, p. 54.

<sup>3</sup> Fronts were formations that controlled multiple Soviet armies.

remained the Feldherr or supreme German warlord. He would direct the battle as he saw fit, but he did allow his generals more operational freedom than he had during the winter crisis of 1941-42 and during Stalingrad. One of the most notable outward signs of Hitler's desire to control the battle was the appointment of General Kurt Zeitzler as the new Chief of the German General Staff. Zeitzler was in that position more from currying the favor of Hitler than for seniority or military accomplishment. Hitler was also growing more suspicious of the German officer corps and consequently favored politically reliable officers over those who were merely realists. Due to his lack of seniority and accomplishment, Zeitzler did not have the influence over the officer corps that another more experienced, more respected officer might have had. Zeitzler's weak hold on the officer corps probably caused him to back CITADEL, his own brainchild, far longer than was reasonable because that was a way to impress upon his fellow officers his will and determination. Moreover, the officers who would actually execute CITADEL were the crème of the German officer corps, and Zeitzler probably felt he could not back down without undermining his authority in their eyes.

The first of the CITADEL leaders with whom Zeitzler had to deal was Field Marshal Gunther von Kluge. Von Kluge commanded Army Group Center and would orchestrate the overall operations against the north face of the Kursk salient. He was "a traditional Prussian officer who showed considerable aptitude for his chosen profession" and had a long record of success that included leading the German Fourth Army during Operation Barbarossa and

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<sup>4</sup> Cross, Citadel, p. 140; U.S. Army Concepts Analysis Agency, Kursk Operation Simulation and Validation Exercise – Phase III (KOSAVE II), vi; Jukes, Kursk, pp.48-49.

<sup>5</sup> Lehmann, Leibstandarte, III, 197.

assuming command of Army Group Center during the winter battles of 1941-42. Von Kluge's primary subordinate for the Battle of Kursk was the able Colonel General Walther Model.<sup>6</sup>

Model commanded Ninth Army. His mission was to breakthrough between the Orel-Kursk highway and then penetrate to Kursk.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the plan called for Ninth Army to drive its spearheads far enough east so that the new German front guaranteed the use of the railroad network through Maloarkhangelsk to Kursk. General Model had commanded Ninth Army for some time, and his subordinates were gifted generals who had been in their current positions within Ninth Army for some time. These subordinates included General Hans Zorn, General Joachim Lemelsen, General Joseph Harpe, General Johannes Freissner, and General Freiherr von Roman.

General Model's subordinate commanders controlled immense forces. Zorn commanded the XXXXVI Panzer Corps, which consisted of the 258th Infantry Division, the 7th Infantry Division, the 102nd Infantry Division, and the 31st Infantry Division. His mission was to protect the flank of XXXXVII Panzer Corps during the penetration and subsequent exploitation. Lemelsen commanded the XXXXVII Panzer Corps. XXXXVII Panzer Corps included the 20th Panzer Division, the 2nd Panzer Division, the 6th Infantry Division, and the 9th Panzer Division. The Corps' mission was to deliver the main blow in the center of the Ninth Army zone, affect a rapid advance to the high ground north of Kursk, and link up with the forward elements of the Fourth Panzer Army. The XXXXI Panzer Corps, commanded by Harpe, was comprised of the 292nd Infantry Division, the 86th Infantry Division, and the 18th Panzer Division. His forces were to protect the flank of the Ninth Army main effort and tie in with XXIII Corps as it attempted to seize Maloarkhangelsk. Freissner commanded the XXIII Army Corps, which was

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Carell, Scorched Earth: The Russian-German War 1943-1944, pp. 20-24; Ailsby, SS Hell, p. 71.

composed of the 78th Sturm Division, the 383rd Infantry Division, and the 216th Infantry Division. This corps' mission was to seize the town of Maloarkhangelsk and establish a new line east of the railroad. The XX Army Corps, commanded by von Roman, included the 45th Infantry Division, the 72nd Infantry Division, the 137th Infantry Division, and the 251st Infantry Division. Once the enemy began withdrawing, von Roman's Corps was "to form three groups and attack south." Model also kept the 36th Infantry Division and the 12th Panzer Division in reserves behind the XXXXVII Panzer Corps zone. Colonel General von Greim's Luftflotte Six would again support Model's Ninth Army.<sup>8</sup>

Field Marshal von Manstein's larger and more powerful Army Group South was to "drive a sharp wedge toward Kursk via Oboyan, aggressively [screen] its eastern flank, and seek contact with the Ninth Army on the heights north of Kursk."<sup>9</sup> Von Manstein ordered that, after Army Group South had established a new defensive line, all available forces to concentrate in an effort to destroy the enemy units sealed off in the salient. Army Group South's offensive forces consisted of the Fourth Panzer Army, commanded by Colonel General Hoth and Army Detachment Kempf commanded by General of the Panzertruppen Werner Kempf. Von Manstein also held General Walter Nehling's XXIV Panzer Corps in operational reserve and had General of the Luftwaffe Dessoloch's Luftflotte Four providing air cover and close air support.<sup>10</sup>

The Fourth Panzer Army "was to conduct the main effort attack against Kursk with the objective of quickly establishing contact with Ninth Army." Fourth Panzer Army leaders were well-seasoned veterans. General of the Panzertruppen Otto von Knobelsdorff commanded the experienced XXXXVIII Panzer Corps. On his right was SS Obergruppenfuhrer Paul Hausser

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<sup>7</sup> Busse, Zitadelle, p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. pp. 22-24; Glantz and House, Kursk, p. 54.

<sup>9</sup> Busse, Zitadelle, p. 14.

commanding the powerful II SS Panzer Corps. General of the Infantry Eugen Ott held the left flank of the Army with the LII Army Corps. The XXXXVIII Panzer Corps consisted of 3rd Panzer Division, Grossdeutschland Panzer Grenadier Division, 11th Panzer Division, 10th (Panther) Tank Brigade, and 167th Infantry Division. The XXXXVIII Panzer Corps' mission was the primary thrust toward Oboyan and the link-up with Ninth Army. The 1st SS, 2nd SS, and 3rd SS Panzer Grenadier Divisions comprised the II SS Panzer Corps. The SS Corps also had lavish modern combat support and combat service support units, and its mission was to engage enemy reserves "approaching from an easterly direction" and to destroy these forces before the linkup of the Fourth Panzer Army and the Ninth Army. The 225th, 332nd, and 57th Infantry Divisions made up the LII Army Corps. The LII's mission was to make a diversionary attack on the first day and subsequently protect the western flank of the XXXXVIII Panzer Corps.<sup>11</sup>

Von Manstein assigned Army Detachment Kempf to aggressively screen the right flank of the main effort attack of the Fourth Panzer Army. Colonel General Werner Kempf's subordinate commanders included General of the Panzertruppen Erhard Rauss, General of the Infantry Franz Mattenklott, and General of the Panzertruppen Hermann Breith. General Rauss commanded the XI Army Corps whose mission was to support the III Panzer Corps' right flank and support its attacks. XI Corps consisted of 106th and 320th Infantry Divisions. With primarily a defensive role, General Mattenklott commanded the XLII Army Corps and his subordinate units were 39th, 161st, and 282nd Infantry Divisions. Due to his mission, Mattenklott's forces were not extensively involved in attack on Kursk. General Breith commanded the III Panzer Corps whose mission was to "engage and defeat the strong enemy

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<sup>10</sup> Von Manstein, Lost Victories, p. 447; Healy, Kursk, p. 16.

reserve" and a possible "thrust northeast or north in conjunction with the forces on the right wing of the Fourth Panzer Army."<sup>12</sup> The III Panzer Corps commanded 168th Infantry, 19 Panzer, 6th Panzer, and 7th Panzer Divisions.

Stalin, like Hitler, was both the supreme commander of his nation's highest headquarters and the ruthless dictator of his nation. Both kept a firm grasp on all aspects of the war, but Stalin was much more inclined to trust his generals than Hitler. Stalin placed one of his most capable generals and his military deputy, Marshal Georgi K. Zhukov, in overall command of all the Soviet forces involved in the Battle of Kursk. Moreover, it had been Zhukov's vision that the Stavka adopted for the defense and the subsequent counterattack plan, so Stalin's choice for Zhukov as the commander was very logical. Zhukov would bring in a group of very able and experienced officers to command the Soviet forces involved in the Battle of Kursk.<sup>13</sup>

Colonel General Konstantin Rokossovsky commanded the Central Front, which Zhukov positioned on the northern shoulder of the Kursk salient. Rokossovsky was of Polish descent and birth, but he was an ardent Communist despite the fact that the Soviet government had imprisoned him for three years during Stalin's officer purges of the 1930's. He had proven his ability and gained experience throughout the Russo-German War. Rokossovsky had led the 9th Mechanized Corps during the German invasion in the summer and fall of 1941, the 16th Army during the critical Battle of Moscow, the Don Front with distinction during the Battle of Stalingrad, and the Central Front in the audacious but unsuccessful offensives in February 1943. He also had prewar ties to Zhukov, as the two served together in the 15th Cavalry Division. Rokossovsky's star would continue to rise throughout and after the war. His Central Front

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<sup>11</sup> Busse, *Zitadelle*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p. 20.

consisted of 60th Army, 65th Army, 70th Army, 13th Army, 48th Army, 2nd Tank Army, 9th Tank Corps, and 19th Tank Corps. Additionally, 16th Air Army, which Air Marshal Krasovsky commanded, supported General Rokossovsky's forces.<sup>14</sup> The Stavka also heavily reinforced the Central Front with anti-tank weapons and artillery. In fact, Central Front's defense was superior to Voronezh Front's as it had greater unit density and was on more defensible terrain.

Colonel General Nikolai Vatutin commanded the Voronezh Front on the southern shoulder of the Kursk salient. He had served in many very important staff positions during the Great Patriotic War. Vatutin had been the Northwestern Front chief of staff during the German invasion of 1941, the deputy chief of the general staff, and then a Stavka representative on the Bryansk Front. He also led Voronezh Front beginning in July 1942, the Southwestern Front during the Battle of Stalingrad, and the Voronezh Front again starting in March 1943. Most importantly, Vatutin had proven himself both as Stalin's personal representative and as a military leader on many occasions including the Battle of Stalingrad. His Voronezh Front consisted of 38th Army, 40th Army, 6th Guards Army, 69th Army, 7th Guards Army, 1st Tank Army, 35th Guards Rifle Corps, 2d Guards Tank Corps, and 5th Guards Tank Corps. Additionally, 2nd Air Army, which Air Marshal Rudenko led, provided air support General Vatutin's units. The Voronezh Front, like the Central Front, had abundant anti-tank weaponry and artillery; however, the Voronezh Front was facing the stronger of the two German attack groupings, and it was on

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<sup>13</sup> Cross, Citadel, pp. 110-111; David M. Glantz and Harold S. Orenstein, The Battle for Kursk 1943: The Soviet General Staff Study, p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> Cross, Citadel, p. 74; Glantz and House, Kursk, pp. 45-46, 61; Healy, Kursk, p. 23; Ailsby, SS Hell, p. 70.

less defensible terrain than the Central Front. Furthermore, erroneous intelligence misled Vatutin into concentrating his defense away from the actual point of the German attack.<sup>15</sup>

Colonel General Ivan Konev commanded the Steppe Military District, which would be renamed the Steppe Front in May 1943. This massive formation was in reserve to the east of the Kursk salient and "represented nothing less than Stavka's entire strategic reserve."<sup>16</sup> Konev was a World War and Civil War veteran who had fought for the Red Army after 1918. In 1941 he had led ad hoc formations during the Battle of Smolensk and in the Western Front prior to the Battle of Moscow. Konev subsequently commanded the Kalinin Front during the Battle of Moscow and then the Western Front during the disastrous Operation MARS. He hoped that his Steppe Front would be committed in toto, but this would not be the case. Konev's huge organization consisted of 4th Guards Army, 5th Guards Army, 5th Guards Tank Army, 47th Army, 27th Army, 53rd Army, 3rd Guards Cavalry Corps, 5th Guards Cavalry Corps, 7th Guards Cavalry Corps, 4th Guards Tank Corps, 3rd Guards Mechanized Corps, 3rd Guards Tank Corps, 10th Tank Corps, and 1st Mechanized Corps. Additionally, 5th Air Army, which Colonel-General Goryunov commanded, supported Konev. Zhukov positioned this massive formation of ground and air units to counter a German offensive across a broad front and to cover the three main attack axes. The Steppe Front's mission was primarily an offensive one, whether as a counterattacking force within the defensive framework or as a purely offensive operation. It is also crucial to note that at this time the Stavka moved 27th and 53rd Army east of Kursk and 46th and 47th Armies east of Kharkov without detection by German intelligence.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Healy, Kursk, p. 12; Ailsby, SS Hell, p. 70; S. P. Ivanov, "Completing the Turning Point in the War," Voyenno-Istoricheskiy Zhurnal (June 1983) in Translations on USSR Military Affairs no. 1813 (November 10, 1983), p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> Cross, Citadel, pp. 129-130.

<sup>17</sup> Glantz and House, Kursk, pp. 32, 47-48, 61, 74; Ailsby, SS Hell, p. 70. This information plays a pivotal role in assessing the German feeling that Kursk was a "lost victory." Those who have argued that the Germans were



Operation CITADEL clearly had promise as a concept, but the Germans had made a series of mistakes. For one thing, von Manstein had envisioned an attack in the first half of May 1943, but Hitler's series of delays pushed the actual attack back to July. Consequently, the attack was probably doomed to failure from the onset due to the massive Soviet fortification and reinforcement of the salient during the interim. By waiting Hitler had only made the prospects of victory wane. The Red Army made superb use of time and their intelligence sources to prepare the defense and the counterattack phases of their sound plan to defeat Operation CITADEL. A second German error was that it was not necessary for General Kempf's forces to press eastward from Belgorod to enlarge the operational attack. Kempf's mission was, first and foremost, to protect the left flank of the Fourth Panzer Army first and would have better served the Fourth Panzer Army by trailing the II SS Panzer Corps. By trailing the Fourth Panzer Army, Army Detachment Kempf would have been on the defensive against counterattacks from the 7th Guards Army and, later, from Steppe Front reinforcements. Kempf's men could also have used the northern Donets River as their eastern flank, thus making Soviet counterattacks more difficult. In this manner, von Manstein would have had more forces to keep in reserve and to rotate in and out of the front line. He also could have used central position with respect to the southern face of the Kursk salient. As it was, the Wehrmacht had an average of 92-97 percent of its combat power engaged throughout the battle, while the Red Army had only roughly 66 percent of its forces engaged. The nearly constant combat conditions undoubtedly eroded the German soldiers' effectiveness.<sup>18</sup>

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close to victory at Kursk have not taken into account these Soviet Armies. Also of note is that Zhukov had to rescue Konev on several occasions in the past, and Konev's luck would not turn for the better until the Battle of Kursk. Some also argue that Stalin began grooming Konev as a political counterweight to Zhukov at this time. The Stavka designed Operation MARS to cutoff the Rzhev salient and destroy the German forces therein. It was the twin to Operation Uranus, which was the codename for the Soviet counterattack on Stalingrad.

<sup>18</sup> Von Manstein, Lost Victories, p. 447; and KOSAVE II, vi.

The Red Army and the Wehrmacht in 1943 were going in opposite directions. The Red Army was on the rise with respect to overall fighting skill and battlefield success. It had suffered many defeats at the hands of the Germans, but its leaders and soldiers had learned their painful lessons and were ready to return the favor. The German armed forces had already reached their zenith, and their fighting skills, on the whole, were beginning to wane.<sup>19</sup> This is not to say that the German forces at Kursk were not able fighters—they were the elite of the Wehrmacht—but the remainder of the Axis military units on the eastern front were little better than those of the 1917 German Imperial Army. A perfect indicator is the steadily decreasing scope of the German summer offensives. In 1941 the German Army attacked in three divergent directions across the entire breadth of the Soviet Union. The Wehrmacht was able to attack only on the southern portion of the front in 1942, although it was still strong enough to threaten both Stalingrad and the Caucasus. Similarly, the German Army found itself reduced to attempting to destroy one major salient in 1943. Another factor, perhaps even more telling than the decreasing scale of the German strategic attacks, was transportation. In this regard the Wehrmacht was at a distinct disadvantage to Soviet forces, which had been able to draw on American industry through the Lend-Lease Program. Thus, "[t]he German equivalent to the Red Army quarter-ton jeep for commander or messenger remained the horse. The counterpart of the Studebaker or Dodge six-wheeled drive truck was the horse-drawn panje wagon."<sup>20</sup>

One area that Hitler hoped would make up for the disparity of manpower and equipment quantity between Germany and her foes was the procurement of "miracle weapons." To this end, the Wehrmacht fielded many new pieces of equipment just prior to Kursk. The army deployed

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<sup>19</sup> John Erickson, Road to Berlin: Continuing the History of Stalin's War with Germany, p. 74; Ziemke, Stalingrad to Berlin, pp. 118-199.

<sup>20</sup> Albert Seaton, The Russo-German War 1941-45, pp. 351-352.

the Panther tank, the Elephant heavy tank destroyer, and the Brummbar self-propelled howitzer. Hitler paid special attention to these new vehicles. In fact, his "interest in everything technical led him to overestimate the importance of his technical resources. As a result, he would count on a mere handful of assault gun detachments or the new Tiger tanks to restore situations where large bodies of troops could not have any prospect of success."<sup>21</sup>

Of the "miracle weapons," only the previously tested Tiger, Hummel, and Wespe made any real contribution to the battle. The new Panther tanks had problems ranging from transmission failures to engine fires to getting stuck in minefields, and Hitler had delayed the operation primarily for the new Panther tank. The new Elephant assault gun also had several severe battlefield difficulties. It had a poor mobility as its engine lacked the horsepower to compensate for the vehicle's immense weight of 68 tons. Its tracks were also very vulnerable to immobilization. Unlike the Panther, the Elephant had a fatal flaw in that it lacked a secondary machinegun for self-protection. This failing made it easy prey for infantry tank killers.<sup>22</sup> The Wehrmacht also fielded the Brummbar but not in great numbers and it was an urban combat vehicle; therefore, it had minimal effect on the Battle of Kursk.

Hitler delayed Operation CITADEL several times from the original date of execution of May 25 or just after the spring thaw to wait for these new vehicles. He made the first postponement to mid-June to wait for the Panthers. Although the high command agreed that the

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<sup>21</sup> Von Manstein, Lost Victories, p. 275. Although the author is attempting to exonerate himself on the surface, his comments on Hitler remain accurate in this case. It is well documented that Hitler hoped that new technologies would prove to be the difference on the battlefield, and this example is merely one of many instances.

<sup>22</sup> James Lucas, Das Reich: The Military Role of the 2nd SS Division, p. 103; Jukes, Kursk, p. 38; Helmuth Spaeter, The History of the Panzerkorps Grossdeutschland, II, 108; Timothy J. Kutta, "Elephants at War - The Truth," Command: Military History, Strategy & Analysis, Issue 36/ March 1996, pp. 28-29; Carrell, Scorched Earth, p. 40; Alan Clark, Barbarossa: The Russian-German Conflict, 1941-1945, p. 296. In fact, at that time only 50 Panthers and 25 Tigers were being produced each month. Hitler insisted on having these weapons in large quantities for Operation CITADEL. Guderian, Inspector of the German Armored Force during the preparation for Kursk, and Albert Speer, head of the German economic war effort at that time, endeavored to increase these numbers.

new date was the latest if the operation was to succeed, Hitler changed the date of the start of CITADEL to July 4. Meanwhile, Ninth Army was falling behind in preparations due mostly to heavy partisan activity in its rear, but Model had become deeply concerned by reports that the Soviet Central Front was rapidly and thoroughly fortifying its entire defensive zone. It is a great irony that the long delay for the new special weapons allowed the Soviets to prepare so extensively and consequently, win the battle in which the new weapons played no decisive role.<sup>23</sup>

The Luftwaffe deployed a full two-thirds of its aircraft on the Eastern Front to support CITADEL. This included fighter aircraft that had the task of gaining air superiority over the battlefield, which would allow the use of aircraft to support the ground offensive. The Junkers Ju 87G-1, which was armed with two 37mm cannon, made its first appearance at Kursk with devastating effect on Soviet armor. The Henschel Hs 129B, armed with an underfuselage-mounted 30mm cannon, played a pivotal role as the first aircraft to destroy a battalion-sized armor unit. This took place in the defense of the SS Panzer Corps' flank on July 8. The Ju 87G-1 and Hs 129B greatly aided the German ground attack while the Germans held local air superiority.<sup>24</sup> However, the Red Air Force had risen from its ashes, like its ground counterpart, and would hold air superiority as the rule rather than the exception for the rest of the war.

The Red Army did not field any new tanks in the Battle of Kursk but did employ vast numbers of T-34 tanks. In fact, the Soviet Union was producing only the T-34 and KV families of tanks at the time of Kursk. This was very different from the Germans who produced a large number of dissimilar armored vehicles that did not have common parts. The smaller number of models simplified the replacement parts situation, and greater industrial capacity coupled with

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<sup>23</sup> Busse, *Zitadelle*, pp. 11-12.

the focused effort on two families of tanks allowed Soviet tank production to outpace German tank production. Another factor that greatly added to the number of tanks available to the Red Army, as well as to its operational flexibility, was Lend-Lease transportation vehicles from the United States. The lavish number of trucks the Red Army received from the U.S. allowed great mobility of infantry and logistics during movement-intensive operations. The Soviet Union did introduce a new tank destroyer, the SU-152, in small numbers at the Battle of Kursk. The SU-152 was a self-propelled 152mm howitzer, and it had devastating effects on German forces. The SU-152 was able to defeat both the Tiger and the Elephant, which earned it the sobriquet "animal killer."<sup>25</sup>

The Soviet Air Force, like the Luftwaffe, employed large numbers of new aircraft at Kursk. The Yakovlev Yak 3 saw its first action there. The Yak 3 and the recently introduced Yakovlev Yak 1M gave the Red Army Air Force fighter aircraft that were technologically comparable to German aircraft. Because of these fighters, Soviet pilots were on equal footing with their German counterparts. Moreover, there were 2,000 Soviet fighter aircraft in the Kursk salient, which gave them a 5:1 numerical advantage over the Germans. The result was that the Soviets enjoyed air parity or air superiority over Kursk for the most of the battle. In terms of close air support, the ubiquitous Shturmovik also made its presence felt on the battlefields of Kursk. The latest model was the Ilyushin Il-2m3 that had the additions of a rear gunner and heavier armor. The Shturmovik, like the Stuka 87G-1, also had 37mm underwing cannon capable of penetrating most German tanks. These new Shturmoviks destroyed many tanks

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<sup>24</sup> Healy, Kursk, p. 48, 67; Cross, Citadel, p. 123; Lucas, Das Reich, p. 103.

<sup>25</sup> Jukes, Kursk, pp. 34-35; Healy, Kursk, p. 24; Cross, Citadel, p. 70.

during the Battle of Kursk, especially those of the 9th Panzer Division deployed against the Central Front.<sup>26</sup>

The Wehrmacht would attempt to demonstrate that it was still the world's master of mechanized warfare during Operation CITADEL. The German commanders wanted to use the tactics that had brought them to the brink of European dominance, but there were many impediments to successful execution of this style of warfare. Their foremost hindrance was the lack of artillery. The artillery support forces on both the north and south face of the Kursk salient were "extremely weak for a breakthrough through a positions system."<sup>27</sup> To counter this lack of artillery, General Model also used a questionable tactic, as he kept his armor back and attempted to use his infantry to open gaps for tanks to exploit. This tactic, however, did not take full advantage of mass and combined arms operations. His decision, coupled with the lack of surprise and insufficient artillery support, degraded Ninth Army's offensive momentum on the north face of the Kursk salient. The depth, breath, and density of the Soviet defense also forced Army Group South to abandon the traditional hallmarks of the blitzkrieg. In other words, the German tanks could not to penetrate the main defensive line and then wreak havoc in the enemy's rear, so they attacked in armored waves.<sup>28</sup> The Wehrmacht soldiers referred to these armored waves as a Panzerkeil.

The Panzerkeil was a tank wedge consisting of Tiger tanks moving at the point of a wedge with Panthers flanking them. Mark IIIs, Mark IVs, and Stug III assault guns followed the

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<sup>26</sup> Healy, Kursk, p. 67; Willmott, Great Crusade, p. 303; Cross, Citadel, pp. 121-122. New Soviet ordnance also made quite an impact as well. The new RS-82 and RS-132 rocket-propelled missiles and the new PTAB hollow-charge anti-tank bombs made the Shturmovik even more deadly.

<sup>27</sup> Spaeter, History, II, 108.

<sup>28</sup> Jukes, Kursk, pp. 88-89; Spaeter, History, II, 108. On one hand, it is understandable that General Model would wish to use his infantry in this manner, but it also demonstrates his lack of offensive experience. It had been the general practice of the German Army to utilize Clausewitzian Economy of force, which is actively using all of

Panthers. Panzer grenadiers moved behind the tanks and assault guns. The German leaders hoped that using a succession of Panzerkeils would create a penetration of the Soviet defenses, as using the tanks alone against the Soviet prepared defenses would have been disastrous. The Germans also made heavy use of Nebelwerfer, which was a six-barreled rocket launcher. The Nebelwerfer's main use was to obscure the attacking forces until the actual assault. This was a German attempt to compensate for the prepared Red Army defenses. Nevertheless, using the Panzerkeil was akin to using a sword like a club as the tanks attempted to bludgeon their way through the Soviet defenses rather than creating a penetration and exploiting it. Furthermore, this tactic often gave up the standoff advantage of the Tiger, as it had to close with the enemy in order to protect the older tanks.<sup>29</sup>

The Red Army would challenge the notion that the Wehrmacht was the master of mechanized warfare during its counterattacks in the latter stages of Kursk. The Soviet military's rediscovery and gradual perfection of Marshal Tuchashevsky's theories on deep battle made this challenge possible. The Soviets would first, however, attempt to prove that it was the master of the prepared defensive battle, deploying massive amounts of direct fire and indirect fire weapons to defend the Kursk salient. Red Army leaders integrated artillery, mortars, rocket artillery, and anti-tank guns of all calibers into the defensive scheme. In fact, for the first time during the war a Soviet defense had one and a half times more artillery regiments than it had infantry regiments.

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your forces at once. General Guderian's actions in the opening stages of the Polish Campaign are a good example of this. Heinz Guderian, Panzer Leader, p. 68.

<sup>29</sup> Ailsby, SS Hell, p. 74; Clark, Barbarossa, pp. 330-331; Jukes, Kursk, p. 92; Glantz and House, Kursk, p. 94; Michael Woodgerd, "If You Don't Like This, You May Resign And Go Home: Commanders' Considerations In Assaulting A Fortified Position," p. 66. Mr. Woodgerd telephonically interviewed Mr. Arnold Friesen who fought at Kursk as a 17 year-old SS Officer Candidate Tiger tank platoon leader.

There was also an intense effort to bring all units in the salient up to full strength. 300,000 local civilians also aided the defensive preparations.<sup>30</sup>

The Central Front's defensive sector alone was staggering, consisting of six main lines of defense with intermediary lines, switch positions, communication trenches, and battalion centers of resistance for all-round defense. General Rokossovsky's Front dug 5,000 kilometers of trenches and planted 400,000 mines and ground bombs. The two armies within Central Front that bore the brunt of the German Ninth Army onslaught, the 13th and the 70th, had 112 kilometers of barbed-wire, 10.7 kilometers of electrified wire, and more than 170,000 mines planted in their sectors. The Stavka allotted almost half of its reserve artillery regiments and 4th Breakthrough Artillery Corps to 13th Army alone.<sup>31</sup>

Vatutin's Voronezh Front prepared his sector in a similar manner to Rokossovsky's Central Front. Confidant that the German Ninth Army would make the primary effort of the overall German attack in the north, Vatutin had anticipated a comparatively weak attack against his part of the salient. He was mistaken. Von Manstein's German forces in the south were larger and more powerful than Model's Army in the north. Furthermore, the mobile divisions attacking the Voronezh Front were the elite of the Wehrmacht and Waffen SS. Nevertheless, both the Central and the Voronezh Fronts had an average density of between 2,400 and 2,700 mines per 1.6 kilometers, which were six times that of the defense at Moscow, and four times that of Stalingrad. The preparation of the Central Front and the Voronezh Front was only the beginning

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<sup>30</sup> Otto Chaney, Zhukov, p. 265; Ailsby, SS Hell, p. 71.

<sup>31</sup> Glantz and Orenstein, Kursk, p. 33; Konstantin K. Rokossovsky, A Soldier's Duty, p. 195; Ailsby, SS Hell, p. 72. The 4th Breakthrough Artillery Corps consisted of 484 guns, 216 mortars, and 432 field rocket launchers. This provided the 13th Army with an unprecedented 155 guns and mortars with a caliber exceeding 76mm per 1.6 kilometer of front.



of the defensive network for the entire salient. The Soviet defenses in the Kursk salient had an overall depth of 110 miles with eight distinct lines including the defenses of the Steppe Front.<sup>32</sup>

Soviet anti-tank defenses within the Kursk salient were formidable. Soviet leaders saturated the best avenues of approach with artillery and anti-tank weaponry to repel concentrated German armor attacks. For example, the Voronezh Front created nearly a hundred special defensive positions known as PTOP's (protivotankovye opornye punkty) to destroy and disrupt German armored operations. "The strongpoints, as a rule, were allocated between three to five guns each, up to five anti-tank rifles, and two to five mortars between a section, a platoon of sappers, and a section of submachine-gunners. On the most important axes, the anti-tank strongpoints had up to 12 guns each."<sup>33</sup> In addition to PTOP's, the Red Army formed antitank regions within the defense comprising separate tank brigades, tank regiments, and self-propelled gun regiments kept in reserve to deliver local counterattacks or reinforce rifle regiments. The Soviet units also conducted extensive anti-tank training, which included firing artillery pieces in the direct fire mode and daily infantry company exercises. Even the political commissars worked with the soldiers to train them in these military skills instead of attempting to instill Communist dogma. In fact, the soldiers were to know the best way to destroy German armor better than they had known the Lord's Prayer.<sup>34</sup>

Red Army engineers also played a significant role at Kursk. During the preparation phase, they supervised or executed the emplacement of the minefields, obstacle belts, and

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<sup>32</sup> Ailbsy, *SS Hell*, p. 73; Jukes, *Kursk*, p. 54.

<sup>33</sup> Ailbsy, *SS Hell*, p. 72; Glantz and Orenstein, *Kursk*, p. 35. The Red Army created PTOP's primarily from artillery weapons, but they also included antitank rifles, automatic weapons, tanks, and protective obstacles. Furthermore, PTOP's were often grouped to form interlocking fields of fire. This tactic was modeled after the German pakfront tactic, which was also a 360-degree defensive work that included artillery, antitank weapons, automatic weapons, and anything else that was available.

defensive belts. They also formed new sapper units and mobile obstacle detachments, which had the mission to emplace minefields to hamper the movement of tanks during the fighting. These detachments remined areas the Germans had previously cleared, reinforced minefields that were in imminent danger of assault, and emplaced new obstacles that would channel the attacking Wehrmacht units into Soviet engagement areas. The mobile obstacle detachments and the sapper units both trained extensively with tanks.<sup>35</sup>

The summer of 1943 would renew the contest for strategic initiative between the Axis and the Allies, but this battle would be especially important on the Russo-German front. Both the Wehrmacht and the Red Army were prepared to renew the contest of wills between Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin, as well as the life-and-death struggle between the German people and the Soviet people. The Wehrmacht had brought its attacking forces up to the maximum readiness and lethality that the Reich could muster. Similarly, the Red Army used all of the motherland's resources to create a defense of dizzying intricacy, a deadly web of kill sacks and anti-armor pakfronts.

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<sup>34</sup> David M. Glantz, Soviet Defensive Tactics at Kursk, July 1943, no. 11, p. 13; Glantz and Orenstein, Kursk, p. 47; Ivanov, "Completing the Turning Point in the War," Voyenno-Istoricheskiy Zhurnal, in Translation of USSR Military Affairs, p. 16.

<sup>35</sup> Jukes, Kursk, p. 88; Glantz and Orenstein, Kursk, p. 49.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE BATTLE BEGINS

The first stage of the Battle of Kursk began on July 4, 1943 with a German artillery barrage, and this phase ended on July 12 before the Battle of Prokhorovka. General Walther Model's German Ninth Army attacked General Konstantin Rokossovsky's Soviet Central Front on the northern face of the Kursk salient, while von Manstein's German Army Group South simultaneously assaulted through the defensive works of General Nikolai Vatutin's Soviet Voronezh Front on the southern face of the salient. The German forces were well prepared for the offensive, but the Soviets had created an intricate prepared defense to defeat the weight of the Nazi onslaught. The resulting clash of arms was a bloody struggle of immense proportions that would have an enormous impact on World War II.

Forewarned by ULTRA and LUCY intelligence, Rokossovsky and Vatutin put their units on full alert starting on July 3. The tension heightened as soldiers stood ready behind their weapons. Meanwhile, German pioneers, or combat engineers, removed mines in preparation for the attack. In one case, approximately ten men of the 2nd Company of Grossdeutschland's Assault Pioneer Battalion cleared 2,700 mines on the night before the attack, which says much about the extent of the Soviet defensive preparation. The Battle of Kursk began on the night of July 4, when elements of the II SS Panzer Corps successfully made preliminary attacks to gain better terrain that would act as artillery observation points and as springboards for the general assault the next day.<sup>1</sup> In the waning moments before the general assault, German officers read several Orders of the Day to their soldiers that stressed the decisive nature of the impending

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<sup>1</sup> Helmuth Spaeter, *The History of the Panzerkorps Grossdeutschland*, II, 113; Geoffrey Jukes, *Kursk: The Clash of Armour*, p. 84; Rudolf Lehmann, *The Leibstandarte III: 1 SS Panzer Division Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler*, Vol. III, 204; Theodor Busse, *The Zitadelle Offensive*, p. 24. An example of these operations was panzer

operation. Operation CITADEL, Hitler proclaimed in one message, "would be decisively important to the outcome of the war."<sup>2</sup> In another, he stated that Operation CITADEL would "shine out to the world like a beacon."<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately for Hitler, that beacon would not symbolize another "Triumph of the Will," but would mark the beginning of the military decline of the Thousand Year Reich.

The battle began in earnest when Rokossovsky's Front launched a pre-emptive artillery barrage at 02:20 a.m. on July 5. The barrage disrupted the German units as they prepared for the attack in densely packed assembly areas, but the German artillery countered with a previously scheduled barrage at 04:30 a.m. Vatutin, like his comrade to the north, ordered his own pre-emptive artillery barrage at 02:30 a.m., disrupting the German preparations somewhat. Model's artillery, like von Manstein's, countered with a barrage at 03:30 a.m.<sup>4</sup> The Red Air Force attempted to raid Luftwaffe airports in conjunction with the Red Army pre-emptive artillery barrages; however, the German Freya radar detected the approach of the attacking Soviet aircraft, allowing German fighters to intercept the attack. Shortly after these artillery and air precursors, the German ground units launched the attacks for which both sides had been preparing so long.<sup>5</sup>

In the attack zones of both Ninth Army and Army Group South, the German soldiers quickly realized that they had completely underestimated the effectiveness of the Red Army defenses. German planners knew that the Soviet defenders intended to rely on deep and well-

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grenadiers of the 1st SS Panzer Grenadier Division Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler when they seized Hill 288.6 to provide cover on its left flank.

<sup>2</sup> James Lucas, Das Reich: The Military Role of the 2nd SS Division, pp. 103-104.

<sup>3</sup> Albert Seaton, The Russo-German War 1941-45, p. 354.

<sup>4</sup> Konstantin K. Rokossovsky, A Soldiers Duty, p. 195; Jukes, Kursk, p. 84; Paul Carrell, Scorched Earth: The Russian-German War, 1943-1944, p. 34.

fortified positions to hold onto Kursk and were willing to deploy tank forces close to the front, but German intelligence did not foresee the level of fortification that confronted their ground forces. The attack “proved to be a difficult affair, contrary to German expectations. Resistance and other obstacles were stronger than expected.”<sup>6</sup> Despite the labyrinthine defenses and consequent losses, the Wehrmacht units made early progress in both sectors. However, they did not attain their objectives for the first day along either of the axes, since the objectives were far too ambitious given the level of Soviet preparation.

Model's Ninth Army attacked with infantry as its first attack echelon and mechanized units as the second attack echelon. The 20th Panzer Division was, in fact, the only panzer division used with the first echelon of the attack. Model's primary opponent was Lieutenant General N. P. Pukhov's 13th Army, which was well prepared and supported along the entirety of its forty-kilometer long sector. Ninth Army met resistance that far exceeded their intelligence calculations, which was probably due to the Soviet's incorrect assessment that the primary German effort would be from the north. Model's soldiers made some small gains against Rokossovsky's Central Front, but most attacks "ground to a complete standstill" or intense Red Army defensive fire checked them. Moreover, the Red Air Force incessantly attacked the rear areas of the German Ninth Army while it attempted to penetrate the Soviet lines. Model and his subordinate leaders completed new plans while in contact, and reserve units were committed to

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<sup>5</sup> Robin Cross, Citadel: The Battle of Kursk, p. 169; Christopher Ailsby, SS Hell On the Eastern Front: The Waffen SS War In Russia, 1941-1945, p. 74; Konstantin Rokossovsky, "Kursk Battle, Part I," Soviet Military Review no. 7, p. 31.

<sup>6</sup> Lehmann, Leibstandarte, III, p. 20; V. Matsulenko, "New Stage in Tactics," Soviet Military Review no. 6 (1973), p. 24; Spaeter, History, II, 115.

the battle including Tiger tanks and Elephant self-propelled guns. With the additional support in the 10-mile wide main attack zone, the German forces were able to make forward progress.<sup>7</sup>

The 6th Infantry Division, spearheaded by Tigers of the powerful Heavy Panzer Battalion 505, penetrated five kilometers and seized the village of Bobrik by the end of July 5. This small gain by such an important and powerful German force demonstrated that the Wehrmacht would have difficulty creating a penetration of the size necessary to significant exploitation.

Furthermore, the 254th and 148th Soviet rifle divisions inflicted heavy losses on the Germans by repulsing the attack of XXIII Army Corps on the village of Maloarkhangelsk. Seizure of this village was vital to protect Model's armor from counterattacking Soviet reserves. The night of July 5 left Model with a lodgment fifteen kilometers wide and, at its greatest extent, eight kilometers deep. Worse yet was the fact that, of the three hundred armored vehicles committed to battle, two hundred had either had failed mechanically or Soviet troops destroyed them. Model thus lost one fifth of his armored capability on the initial day of combat.<sup>8</sup>

General Rokossovsky redeployed his reserves on the night of July 5 in order to attack the following day. The divisions of the 17th and 18th Guards Rifle Corps, with support from the 3rd, 16th, 19th, and 9th Tanks Corps, were to begin offensive operations at 5:30 a.m. on July 6 in support of 13th Army. This plan was poorly coordinated and consequently only the 17th Guards Rifle Corps and the 16th Tank Corps went over to the counteroffensive. The remainder of the counterattack forces was either already too heavily engaged or was unable to move fast enough to participate in the attack. Meanwhile, Model chose to commit the 2nd, 9th, and 18th Panzer Divisions from his second echelon to the battle at the same time. The result was a furious tank

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<sup>7</sup> David Glantz, Soviet Defensive Tactics at Kursk, July 1943, no. 11, p. 29; Ailsby, SS Hell, p. 74; Carell, Scorched Earth, pp. 36-38.

<sup>8</sup> Cross, Citadel, pp. 163, 167; David M. Glantz and Jonathan M. House, The Battle of Kursk, pp. 86, 91; Jukes, Kursk, p. 91.

battle that lasted for four days west and northeast of Ponyri Station.<sup>9</sup> Because this area acted as the linchpin of the Soviet main defensive belt, a German seizure of Ponyri Station might have unhinged the entire Central Front defense. Consequently, the importance of the terrain and the intense German pressure forced the Red Army leaders to commit their armored formations as they were ready and in piecemeal fashion. The heavy Soviet tank losses also forced the Front leaders to dig tanks in as part of pakfronts. By digging in, the tanks became little more than pillboxes in a static defense rather than mobile forces. The Red Air Force was also making its presence felt as assault aircraft engaged the attacking Germans and destroyed many tanks.<sup>10</sup>

The Fourth Panzer Army's two main units, the XXXXVIII Panzer Corps and II SS Panzer Corps, faced Lieutenant General I. M. Chistyakov's 6th Guards Army. Initially, Fourth Panzer Army "got off to a flying start, cutting through Vatutin's first line in two hours."<sup>11</sup> However, weather, terrain, and Soviet artillery quickly slowed the German units. It had rained nearly all of the previous night, which had turned the roads and tracks into muddy quagmires. An additional deluge on the morning of July 5 flooded the numerous gullies in the area, as the rain the night before had saturated the ground. This created numerous water obstacles, and several of these required bridging equipment. One particularly large flooded gully, in fact, halted the XXXXVIII Panzer Corps for the better part of the day. Ironically, many of the Panthers that Hitler had delayed the entire operation for were either out of commission due to maintenance problems or Soviet anti-tank gunners destroyed them in swampy minefields.<sup>12</sup>

Intense Red Army artillery bombardment, in addition to the rugged Soviet defense and poor weather, slowed the II SS Panzer Corps, which was on the right flank of XXXXVIII Panzer

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<sup>9</sup> Glantz and House, Kursk, pp. 92-93.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Healy, Kursk 1943: The Tide Turns in the East, pp. 53-54; Glantz and House, Kursk, p. 93.

<sup>11</sup> Earl F. Ziemke, Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East, p. 135; Glantz, Tactics, p. 29.

Corps. Once it had weathered the steel storm, which had been silenced by Stuka close air support, the II SS Panzer Corps continued its attack. 1st SS Panzer Grenadier Division Leibstandarte took Hill 220.5 by 11:30, but only after a bitter five-hour fight. Because of this minor SS victory, Vatutin abandoned the first line of defense in favor of the second late on July 5. He also ordered two tank corps of the 1st Tank Army to move forward and assist in the defense. Meanwhile, a furious air battle raged over the southern wing of the Battle of Kursk. In terms of planes claimed shot down, this aerial engagement was unequalled even by the fighting at the height of the "Marianas Turkey Shoot" in the Pacific in June-July 1944. Despite the heavy fighting, von Manstein's group carved a penetration ten kilometers wide in the first Soviet line of defense by the end of the first day.<sup>13</sup>

After regrouping, von Knobelsdorff's XXXXVIII Panzer Corps resumed the offensive on the mid-morning of July 6, and Hausser's II SS Panzer Corps also renewed its attack early that day. The XXXXVIII Panzer Corps was unable to reach its objective for July 6, the Psel River, but it would be in a good position to do so on the following day. Meanwhile, the II SS Panzer Corps advanced rapidly, but both panzer corps had steadily lost men and tanks. In fact, July 6 would be the worst single day of CITADEL for German tank losses.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, the XXXXVIII Panzer Corps had created three small pockets of Soviet forces by nightfall, but the corps momentum was slowing. The II SS Panzer Corps, for its part, had not created any pockets of Red Army units, but its headlong push was exposing its flanks. Because of this, the 3rd SS

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<sup>12</sup> Seaton, Russo-German War, p. 361; Ziemke, Stalingrad to Berlin, p. 135; Spaeter, History, II, 118.

<sup>13</sup> Lehmann, Leibstandarte, III, 214; Ivanov, "Completing the Turning Point in the War," Voyenno-Istoricheskiy Zhurnal, in Translation of USSR Military Affairs, p. 17; Cross, Citadel, p. 182; T. N. Dupuy and Paul Martell, Great Battles on the Eastern Front: The Soviet-German War: 1941-1945, p. 78.

<sup>14</sup> Glantz and House, Kursk, pp.107-108; Lehmann, Leibstandarte, III, 214; U.S. Army Concepts Analysis Agency, Kursk Operation Simulation and Validation Exercise – Phase III (KOSAVE II), p.5-12.



Panzer Grenadier Division Totenkopf was forced to screen the II SS Panzer Corps' right flank; thus, the attack at Corps level was clearly not unfolding as intended.

Army Detachment Kempf's mission was simple yet crucial: protect the Fourth Panzer Army's left flank as it attacked north to link up with Ninth Army. Kempf's forces, however, could not do this if they lagged behind the Fourth Panzer Army. This became an issue almost immediately. Kempf's Offensive progress was slow in part because most of the Luftwaffe close air support and fighter protection went to the Fourth Panzer Army and Kempf's forces got little.<sup>15</sup> On July 5, Breith's III Panzer Corps had managed to gain a small bridgehead over the Donets River south of Belgorod. As a reaction to this threat, Vatutin reinforced Lieutenant General M. S. Shumilov's 7th Guards Army with three rifle divisions. Vatutin hoped to keep Kempf's formation pinned to the Donets bridgeheads that its units had created. Nevertheless, Kempf had pushed east across the Donets in force by the end of July 6. Furthermore, the III Panzer Corps had created two pockets of Soviet units. Unfortunately for Army Detachment Kempf, its units were not faring as well as the Fourth Panzer Army had and were falling alarmingly behind from the outset.

Ninth Army renewed its attempt to breakthrough the Soviet defenses on July 7. This fight still revolved around Ponyri Station, and General Model hoped that once this area fell, the elusive breakthrough to Kursk would follow. The fighting between the village of Soborovka and Ponyri included over 2,000 armored fighting vehicles from both sides, and Model's forces still could not break the Soviet defense. Ninth Army would later refer to Ponyri Station as "the Stalingrad of Kursk" because of the savage house-to-house fighting that occurred and the five futile attacks by the 18th Panzer and the 292nd Infantry Divisions. Model chose to expand the

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<sup>15</sup> Glantz, Tactics, p. 29; Seaton, Russo-German War, p. 362; Ziemke, Stalingrad to Berlin, pp. 135-136.

breadth of his assault from the previous one on the 6th when he had "3,000 guns and mortars, 5,000 machine-guns, and over 1,000 tanks" packed into a six-mile attack sector. He did this in the hopes of finding a weakness and to draw some of Rokossovsky's reserves elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> However, moving his point of attack would have been more sound than widening his attack, as it would have allowed Model to retain as much striking power as possible, hopefully gain some tactical surprise, and continue to hold the initiative.

While Model prepared to renew the attack, General Rokossovsky prepared to thwart the renewed German offensive. He reconstituted his reserves by moving an entire division from Lieutenant General Chernyakhovsky's 60th Army and two tank regiments from Lieutenant General Batov's 65th Army closer to Ponyri.<sup>17</sup> The Central Front Commander also ordered Lieutenant General Rodin's tanks to dig in up to their turrets for the following three reasons: the failed counterattack on July 6 forfeited a large number of tanks and digging in would help protect the remainder, the German tank crews were utilizing their stand-off range to destroy Soviet tanks and digging in would afford the tank crews some cover and concealment, and the sheer number of first echelon defensive tank losses was a cause of great concern.<sup>18</sup> In this manner, Rokossovsky's Central Front prepared to repel Model's Ninth Army.

On July 8, Model had his armored forces attack on three major axes—toward Teploye, Olkhovatka, and Ponyri. He also committed the fresh 4th Panzer Division to seize the village of Teploye and Hill 272. In short order all three attacks confirmed his worst fears about the Soviet defense in the Kursk salient. Ninth Army barely managed to push the Soviets defenders out of

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<sup>16</sup> John Erickson, The Road to Berlin: Continuing the History of Stalin's War with Germany, p. 101; Cross, Citadel, p. 184; Glantz and House, Kursk, p. 115; Seaton, The Russo-German War, p. 364. A good indicator of the intensity of the fighting was that Model, despite having stockpiled ammunition before the attack, had to ask for 100,000 additional tank gun rounds on 7 July.

<sup>17</sup> Healy, Kursk, p. 54.

<sup>18</sup> Erickson, The Road to Berlin, p. 102.

the village of Teploye, and Rokossovsky countered that small victory by committing the 140th Rifle Division and 11th Guards Tank Brigade to stabilize the situation. This reinforcement prevented the 4th Panzer Division attempt to push the Soviets off the key Hill 272. Similarly, the elements of the 2nd Panzer, 20th Panzer, and 6th Infantry Division were unable to seize Hill 274 in Olkhovatka and never would. Savage streetfighting, or rattenkrieg as the Germans called it, continued at Ponyri Station, but the Soviet 307th Division defenders held tenaciously to the high ground—Hill 253.5.<sup>19</sup> Model's Ninth Army was slowly bled white with little to show for its efforts except burning tanks and dead soldiers on the steppe.

The II SS Panzer Corps continued its rapid advance north and northeast with the 1st SS Panzer Grenadier Division in the vanguard. Leibstandarte took the village of Lutschki in the early morning hours and continued its advance north, despite heavy resistance by Vatutin's infantry and armor, towards the village of Tetreveno. The SS attack badly shook Vatutin's forces, but the Red Army soldiers continued to hold onto the shoulders of the penetration. Furthermore, the 5th Guards Tank Army, 2nd Tank Corps, and 10th Tank Corps were en route to Voronezh Front to halt the German penetration. The Red Army also mounted many tactical counterattacks, but the Wehrmacht units were able to brush them off with tough defensive fighting and excellent Luftwaffe support. It is important to note that Totenkopf was unable to gain enough ground to link up with Army Detachment Kempf. The Red Army preventing the linkup of the II SS Panzer Corps and Army Detachment Kempf is a seemingly minor Soviet victory, but it would have great ramifications later in the battle.

Despite Totenkopf's setback, the II SS Panzer Corps was able to seize the village of Tetreveno by the evening of July 7. This action ruptured the Sixth Guards Army's second

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<sup>19</sup> Glantz and House, *Kursk*, pp. 117-121; Erickson, *The Road to Berlin*, p. 102, 185. Rattenkrieg is the

defensive belt and exposed a very thin screen of Soviet forces to the northwest. At this point von Manstein ordered the Fourth Panzer Army to turn east, occupy the land bridge at Prokhorovka, and defeat the massive Soviet reserves that would undoubtedly be attacking II SS Panzer Corps' eastern flank.<sup>20</sup>

To the west the XXXXVIII Panzer Corps was also tearing away at Vatutin's defense. The Grossdeutschland Panzer Grenadier Division successfully seized the village of Dubrova. General Hoth then ordered the XXXXVIII Panzer Corps to attack toward Oboyan, as originally ordered in Operation CITADEL's operations plan and to protect the II SS Panzer Corps left flank as it attacked toward Prokhorovka. Despite the expansion of the original mission to include protecting the SS Corps' flank without additional resources, the attack continued to go well for von Knobelsdorff's soldiers. Elements of Grossdeutschland first took Dubrova on the morning of July 7 and veered northwest. The attack of Grossdeutschland successfully linked the XXXXVIII Panzer Corps with the II SS Panzer Corps near the village of Iakovlevo by the end of the day.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the reunion of the Fourth Panzer Army's two panzer corps, the deploying tanks of the 31st Tank Corps forced Leibstandarte to detach additional forces to face them. In a similar manner, Das Reich spread out to extend Totenkopf's flank as well as the flanks of the Corps and the entire the Fourth Panzer Army.<sup>22</sup> This is an example of how the coordination within the Fourth Panzer Army was unraveling, and, worse still, how coordination between the Fourth Panzer Army and Army Detachment Kempf was deteriorating.

The II SS Panzer Corps would continue the attack on July 8 by massing Leibstandarte and Das Reich to complete the destruction of the Soviet forces preventing forward progress,

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derisive term the German soldiers used for urban fighting. It roughly translates to war of the rats.

<sup>20</sup> Lehmann, *Leibstandarte*, III, 217-218; Cross, *Citadel*, p. 201; Glantz and House, *Kursk*, pp. 109, 121; C. W. Sydnor, *Soldiers of Destruction: The SS Death's Head Division, 1933-1945*, p. 285.

<sup>21</sup> Spaeter, *History*, II, 122; Glantz and House, *Kursk*, pp. 112, 123.

while Totenkopf spent most of the day awaiting relief from 167th Infantry Division. Once relieved, Totenkopf would continue the attack with the rest of the Corps.<sup>23</sup> Simultaneously, General Vatutin scoured the Voronezh Front for additional forces to block the twin advance of the XXXXVIII and the II SS Panzer Corps. He was able to shift the 6th Tank Corps to the east in an effort to slow the German advance toward Oboyan. Vatutin also prepared the 10th Tank Corps to counterattack the II SS Panzer Corps "on the nose" with supporting counterattacks by the 11th Motorized Rifle Brigade, remnants of 52nd Guards Rifle Division, 5th Guards Tank Corps, and 2nd Guards Tank Corps. However, these counterattacks were very poorly coordinated and resulted in piecemeal defeat of each of the attacking elements, severe casualties, and great loss of vehicles.<sup>24</sup>

In the XXXXVIII Panzer Corps zone, the Grossdeutschland Panzer Grenadier and 3rd Panzer Divisions continued their attack north on the east bank of the Pena River throughout the day. They were able to capture the well defended village of Sirtsevo by mid-afternoon. Von Knobelsdorff gave orders during the night of July 8 for new attacks the following day. The Grossdeutschland Panzer Grenadier and 11th Panzer Divisions were to advance five kilometers and seize Hill 260.8. Subsequently, Grossdeutschland was to outflank and, in conjunction with the 3rd Panzer and 332nd Infantry Divisions, destroy the 6th Tank Corps that threatened the Corps' left flank. The first portion of the assault went well as the two panzer divisions succeeded in taking the high ground, the town of Verkhopenye, and Verkhopenye's bridge across the Pena River. However, the advance of the XXXXVIII Panzer Corps would subsequently slow because

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<sup>22</sup> Lehmann, *The Leibstandarte*, III, 222-224; Glantz and House, *Kursk*, p. 125.

<sup>23</sup> Ailsby, *SS Hell*, p. 75.

<sup>24</sup> Glantz and House, *Kursk*, pp. 134-135.

of timely repositioning of the 6th Tank Corps elements and intense Soviet resistance.<sup>25</sup> Due to the stiff Soviet defense and signs of slowing offensive operations, von Manstein should have ordered General Nehling's XXIV Panzer Corps begin to move north from the Kharkov area to be close enough to the battle for use and to maintain the momentum of his attack.

To the south and east, the III Panzer Corps was heavily engaged and making slow progress toward its objective of penetrating the Soviet 7th Guards Army. On July 7, the 6th Panzer Division, 7th Panzer Division, and 503rd Heavy Panzer Detachment had managed to advance to the key road junction at Miasoedovo. General Shumilov, Commander of the 7th Guards Army, committed the 92nd Guards Rifle Division, 94th Guards Rifle Division, and 96th Tank Brigade to block the German advance. Despite this, elements of the 6th Panzer Division and 503rd Detachment advanced rapidly to the town of Melikhovo on July 8. Shumilov, with Voronezh Front's permission, countered by committing the 305th Rifle Division from the 69th Army in order to stem the German onslaught. Thus, the III Panzer Corps made progress but was unable to cross the Lipvyi Donets River into the rear of the Soviet defenses.<sup>26</sup>

On the night of July 8, Red Army leaders knew that Model's attack had essentially failed, and the Soviet counterattack on the Orel salient was fully prepared and would begin soon. They also knew that General Konev's powerful Steppe Front was prepared to make its presence felt on the battlefield. To reverse the German success in the Voronezh Front area, the Stavka detached Lieutenant General Pavel Rotmistrov's 5th Guards Tank Army from the Steppe Front and attached it to the Voronezh Front and ordered Rotmistrov to accelerate his move toward

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<sup>25</sup> Cross, Citadel, pp. 199-201; Glantz and House, Kursk, pp. 131-133; Healy, Kursk, p. 65; Spaeter, History, II, 123-125.

<sup>26</sup> Glantz and House, Kursk, pp. 136-137.

Prokhorovka. Rotmistrov was to have forward elements in position west of Prokhorovka by July 10. The Stavka also put Zhadov's Fifth Guards Army under Vatutin's control.

General Hoth also made fateful decisions on the night of July 8. He needed to maintain and increase the momentum of his attack. To do this end, he ordered the XXXXVIII Panzer Corps to have the Grossdeutschland, 3rd Panzer, and 332nd Infantry Divisions attack to the corps' left flank to deal with the persistent armored threat from that quarter. He ordered Grossdeutschland and the 11th Panzer Division to subsequently link up with the II SS Panzer Corps and continue the advance. The II SS Panzer Corps would then attack northward with Leibstandarte and Totenkopf in the van with Das Reich and the 167th Division protecting the Corps' flank. To support this thrust, von Manstein assigned all available close air support missions to support the II SS Panzer Corps.<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately for the German cause, von Manstein had not ordered the XXIV Panzer Corps into a position where it could sustain the attack, if needed.

The fight for Ponyri continued in stalemate, but General Model planned yet another attack to seize the village. On the night of July 10, he replaced the 292nd Division, which was a mere shell of an infantry division by this point, with the fresh 10th Panzer Grenadier Division. This division had powerful organic artillery in the form of seven artillery battalions, a Nebelwerfer regiment, a heavy mortar battalion, and an assault-gun battalion. However, this reinforcement proved futile as Model's forces were unable to seize Ponyri. Soviet ground attack aircraft from the Sixteenth Air Army began to pound the exposed German tanks as the Red Army fighters had driven the Luftwaffe from this sector. Thus, the German Ninth Army never penetrated south of the city of Olkhovatka, an obvious Soviet victory of arms. The Ninth Army

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<sup>27</sup> Glantz and House, Kursk, pp. 138-140; Seaton, Russo-German War, p. 363.

had clearly reached its culminating point as it was exhausted and Model had employed its last reserve. In fact, Model's forces would sow defensive minefields the following morning.<sup>28</sup>

In the south, the XXXXVIII Panzer Corps attacked on the morning of July 9 with more than 500 tanks in a 10-mile front. This action was another attempt to create a penetration toward Oboyan. The Soviet 1st Tank and 6th Guards Armies continued to contest this advance very effectively, as they had fallen back into prepared positions in the second prepared defensive line. Furthermore, the Germans encountered the SU-122 and SU-152 assault guns, which had the mobility and firepower to challenge any German tank. The Wehrmacht advance in the south was slowing appreciably due to the tough Red Army defense. Despite this, the German vanguard was within twelve miles of Oboyan by the end of July 9 and was close to gaining a foothold over the Pena River, which the Red Army was desperately striving to prevent.

In the east, the II SS Panzer Corps continued to penetrate into Soviet territory by pushing both north and east-northeast in the direction of Prokhorovka. The XXXXVIII Panzer Corps also pushed due north. The II SS Panzer Corps, attacking abreast, destroyed the shattered remnants of the 3rd Soviet Mechanized Corps and pushed the 31st Tank Corps back to Kochetovka. This attack was especially difficult as it struck one of the Soviet prepared defensive lines. Meanwhile, elements of Totenkopf reached the Psel River on July 9. These German advances came at a large price, as local commanders ordered Soviet reinforcements into the white-hot battlefield. These Red Army reinforcements destroyed the highest number of German tanks in one day since July 6. However, the German attacks from July 7 to July 9 destroyed over 500 Soviet tanks in three days, which was the largest loss in a similar period during the Battle of Kursk as a whole. These statistics show the ferocity of the fighting as well

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<sup>28</sup> Cross, *Citadel*, pp. 187-188; Glantz, *Tactics*, p. 57. The Nebelwerfer was a powerful but inaccurate



as the desperate struggle for the initiative. In fact, this would be one of the most important factors in Hoth's decision to regroup his forces and push toward Prokhorovka; a direction that he felt was the path of least resistance.<sup>29</sup>

After changing the direction of the main attack, the II SS Panzer Corps moved forward without encountering any enemy resistance; however, events on the western flank of the Fourth Panzer Army continued to raise concern at both Hausser's and Hoth's headquarters. Von Knobelsdorff unleashed the full force of his armor toward the village of Novoselovka on the previous day, yet the Soviets still held it in the morning of July 10. The XXXXVIII Panzer Corps attacks began anew the following day with the 11th Panzer Division, supported by Grossdeutschland in the west and Leibstandarte in the east, seized Hill 260.8 south of Novoselovka. The bitter Soviet resistance forced Grossdeutschland to take over for the 11th Panzer Division shortly after it took Hill 260.8. Later the same day, the 11th Panzer Division also managed to take Hill 244.8. Hill 244.8 was the deepest point of penetration on the Belgorod-Kursk axis during the Battle of Kursk.<sup>30</sup>

As the II SS Panzer Corps threatened to make a major breakthrough, the Soviets committed several of their reserve units. Marshal Zhukov dispatched both Lieutenant General A. S. Zhadov's Fifth Guards Combined Arms Army and Lieutenant General Pavel Rotmistrov's Fifth Guards Tank Army to close the gap that Hoth's armored forces had torn in Vatutin's sector. These two formations would take some time to get to the battlefield as the Konev had positioned them to the east as a strategic reserve for the southern portion of the Soviet Union. Even more disconcerting for the Soviets was that Zhadov and Rotmistrov's had expected to counterattack on

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German rocket launcher

<sup>29</sup> Ulrich Elfrath and Horst Scheibert, Panzers in Russia: German Armoured Forces on the Eastern Front, p. 193; Glantz and House, Kursk, p. 140; Sydnor, Soldiers, p. 286; Ailsby, SS Hell, p. 75; KOSAVE II, p. 5-12; Healy, Kursk, p. 69, 91.

July 12, but the German attack precluded this preplanned counteroffensive. More problematic was that 2nd Tank Corps had also suffered heavy losses already and Rotmistrov had planned to use this unit to counterattack on the 12.<sup>31</sup> However, the German plans were also going awry. Kempf was too far behind schedule "to intercept the Soviet Fifth Guards Tank Army, prevent it from linking up with Katukov's Army, and thereby keep Hoth's flank free."<sup>32</sup> The III Panzer Corps finally broke through the Soviet defenses on the evening of July 10, but the previous delay would have grave implications for the II SS Panzer Corps at Prokhorovka.<sup>33</sup>

Von Manstein had a conference with Kempf and Hoth on the morning of July 11. It was apparent that the enemy was committing strategic reserves and the key German leaders assumed that the enemy had sustained considerable losses so far. Von Manstein, Kempf, and Hoth decided that it was important not to let up. They discussed the following question: should the attack continue considering the condition of the German troops, the strength of the enemy, and Model's stalled attack. Kempf was in favor of completely suspending offensive operations, while Hoth wished to continue the attack with limited objectives. Specifically, Hoth favored destruction of the enemy located south of the Psel River by a coordinated attack by both armies. This conference, despite Kempf's reservations, confirmed for von Manstein to continue the attack. To this end, he ordered Kempf to provide whatever support he could to the II SS Panzer Corps for the decisive engagement at Prokhorovka. Von Manstein hoped that the two forces could link up, but this would be very difficult given the level of Soviet resistance.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Lehmann, Leibstandarte, III, 223; Glantz and House, Kursk, p. 142; Healy, Kursk, p. 74.

<sup>31</sup> Healy, Kursk, pp. 71-74; Glantz and House, Kursk, p. 177. The Fifth Guards, Sixth Guards, Seventh Guards, Fifth Guards Tank, and 1st Tank Armies were to concentrically attack the German Fourth Army with the aim of encirclement.

<sup>32</sup> Carell, Scorched Earth, p. 79.

<sup>33</sup> Healy, Kursk, p. 75.

<sup>34</sup> Spaeter, History, II, 129; Busse, Zitadelle, p. 30; Glantz and House, Kursk, p. 178.

If von Manstein had already pre-positioned the XXIV Panzer Corps behind the Fourth Panzer Army, he could have committed it to the attack on the morning of July 12 to sustain the offensive. He had three major options for its employment. First, the XXIV Panzer Corps could have attempted to break through the Soviet defenses toward Oboyan. Nehling's Corps would have entered combat between the XXXXVIII Panzer Corps and the II SS Panzer Corps. In this case, the XXIV Panzer Corps would have attempted to create a penetration of the Soviet lines and thereby usher in the exploitation towards Kursk. Meanwhile, the II SS Panzer Corps would hold the Steppe Front reinforcements moving west, the XXXXVIII Panzer Corps would continue to attack the Soviet forces on the Fourth Panzer Army's west flank, and the III Panzer Corps would continue its attempt to linkup with the II SS Panzer Corps. The second option was for the XXIV Panzer Corps to have attempted to attack from the II SS Panzer Corps sector east toward Prokhorovka and then assumed the defensive upon contact with a superior Soviet force. This would have allowed the II SS Panzer Corps to focus on attacking north toward Oboyan while a force with sufficient combat power protected its flank. Von Manstein's third option for the XXIV Panzer Corps was to introduce it in the III Panzer Corps sector to rapidly complete the linkup of Kempf's forces with elements of the Fourth Panzer Army. Subsequently, the XXIV Panzer Corps would have assumed a defense upon contact with a superior Soviet force attacking from the east. Of these options, the second seems most attractive because, as a general rule, commanders employ reserves in the offense to reinforce success and the II SS Panzer Corps was more successful than the other Corps in this regard. This option would have also allowed the II SS Panzer Corps time to regroup and then attack north.

The situation was so tense that Stalin had both the Central and the Voronezh Fronts submit hourly situation reports and had reserves moved into blocking positions rather than using

them in a counterattack role. He also ordered Marshal Vasilevsky to remain with and coordinate the efforts of Fifth Guards Tank Army and Fifth Guards Army. Additionally, Stalin also ordered that the 27th Army with 4th Guards Tank Corps moved to Kursk and 53rd Army with 4th Mechanized Corps repositioned to the southeast of the city. Vatutin also reinforced the Fifth Guards Tank Army with the 2nd Tank and 2nd Guards Tank Corps, which brought Rotmistrov's tally to 950 tanks. However, Rotmistrov had only 35 heavy tanks and self-propelled guns within his army and 264 of his tanks were light models; thus, the majority of his tanks were not suited to engage the German tanks they would face.<sup>35</sup>

Kempf's forces continued to press their attacks in order to link up with the II SS Panzer Corps near Prokhorovka. German leaders still hoped that the two forces would link up in time to destroy the Stavka reserves moving west. To increase the numbers of tanks available to aid the link up effort, the 198th Infantry Division relieved the 7th Panzer Division late on July 11. This freed the 7th Panzer Division to join with the rest of the III Panzer Corps push, which now totaled roughly 300 tanks and armored assault guns. Shortly thereafter, 600 tanks and armored assault guns of the II SS Panzer Corps tore through the Soviet forces screening the town of Prokhorovka. Shortly thereafter, the SS men met the leading edges of Fifth Guards Tank Army before Rotmistrov's planned counterattack could be prepared. The Red Army forces fought desperately to stabilize the situation and defeat the SS Panzer Corps before the III Panzer Corps could join the battle from the south. The result was a "cycle of back-and-forth fighting" along the whole line of contact. Consequently, the II SS Panzer Corps would have to reorganize and conduct an assault to take Prokhorovka the following day.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Erickson, Road to Berlin, pp. 105-106; Glantz and House, Kursk, p. 175; Ivanov, "Turning Point," USSR Military Affairs, p. 17.

<sup>36</sup> Busse, Zitadelle, p. 30; Healy, Kursk, p. 76; Lehmann, Leibstandarte, III, 232-233.

Marshal Vasilevsky was orchestrating the defense of Vatutin and Rotmistrov and he planned a counterattack for July 12 to thwart the German drive on Prokhorovka. To this end, Vatutin ordered Rotmistrov to counterattack at 1000 hours on July 12 in the direction of the Komsomolets State Farm and Pokrovka. Rotmistrov's forces would fight in cooperation with 5th Guards and 1st Tank Armies for this attack, whose purpose was to destroy the enemy and prevent his withdrawal to the south.<sup>37</sup> Vatutin also ordered a counterattack against the XXXXVIII Panzer Corps to the east.

While Red Army leaders prepared these new counterattacks, von Manstein ordered Nehling's XXIV Panzer Corps to move up to the vicinity of Kharkov so that this corps could exploit any major success. XXIV Panzer Corps began moving from the Donbas in the evening of July 10 with orders to move to Belgorod. However, the OKH had not yet released the divisions that made up the Nehling's Corps, the 5th SS Panzer Grenadier Division Wiking and 17th Panzer Division, for general use.<sup>38</sup> This was overall a case of too little too late by von Manstein. Because of the tardiness of his decision, Army Group South's reserve would not be present on the battlefield when it was needed most; thus, the II SS Panzer Corps would be left to fight the critical Battle of Prokhorovka with only its own resources.

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<sup>37</sup> Glantz and House, Kursk, p. 179.

<sup>38</sup> Erickson, Road to Berlin, p. 105; Peter Strassner, European Volunteers: 5 SS Panzer Division Wiking, p. 118.

## CHAPTER 5

### PROKHOROVKA AND DENOUEMENT

The Battle of Prokhorovka was the decisive phase of the Battle of Kursk. This engagement began on July 12, 1943, when General Hausser's II SS Panzer Corps renewed its efforts to break through the last line of Soviet defenses to the city of Kursk. Meanwhile, General Rotmistrov's Soviet Fifth Guards Tank Army and Zhadov's Fifth Guards Army counterattacked west, straight into the II SS Panzer Corps. The two huge formations struck just west of the village of Prokhorovka. The resulting titanic battle was a tactical draw. The Germans, however, left the field to the Soviets and strategic considerations in the Mediterranean and on the Eastern Front resulted in Hitler's calling off the battle. Shortly thereafter, the Red Army went on the counteroffensive in the Orel salient, north of Belgorod, and along the Mius River. Exhausted by recent heavy fighting, the Wehrmacht was unable to resist and could only fall back.

The fighting at Kursk had led to the final confrontation at Prokhorovka, and the battle centered on that small town would be the largest tank engagement of World War Two and one of the largest in the Twentieth Century. The Wehrmacht and the Red Army had both envisioned this fight for some time, as it was inevitable that the Soviet reserves from Steppe Front would attack the eastern flank of the German attack. What the German and Soviet Army leaders did not foresee with any certainty was exactly where and when the battle would take place. On July 12, the II SS Panzer Corps attacked toward Prokhorovka with the objective of breaking out to the north, and Vatutin ordered a counterattack to prevent the II SS and III Panzer Corps from linking up.

The battlefield was mostly west of the small village of Prokhorovka, as the meandering Psel River formed its northern boundary, the Kursk-Belgorod railway cutting and hilly terrain

unsuited for mechanized combat formed its southern boundary, and the town of Prokhorovka acted as its eastern boundary.<sup>1</sup> These boundaries delineated the battlefield quite well, which was unusual for the open steppe of upper Donets River valley. However, the battlefield was very muddy after the rains on July 11 and this hindered maneuver in some areas and made the resupply of the forward-most SS units difficult.<sup>2</sup>

The forces that fought at Prokhorovka were immense. The Soviet armored force in the engagement consisted of approximately 950 vehicles of various types including 501 T-34 medium tanks, 264 T-70 light tanks, and 35 British Churchill III medium tanks.<sup>3</sup> The opposing German armored force numbered approximately 300 vehicles in the II SS Panzer Corps and 200 vehicles in the III Panzer Corps. Most of these vehicles were Mark IV medium tanks with some Tiger heavy tanks, new Panther medium tanks, and supporting assault guns. A total of 572 vehicles from both sides fought on the main battlefield west of Prokhorovka, with the remainder fighting in compartmentalized areas demarcated by the Psel River, the Lipovyi River, the Prokhorovka-Belgorod railroad cutting, and adjacent ridgelines.<sup>4</sup>

Hausser's three divisions began their attack on July 12 as planned, but the panzer crewmen and panzer grenadiers did not know what awaited them. General Rotmistrov observed the initial German wave of 200 tanks and supporting aircraft from his headquarters, which was located on a hill to the southwest of Prokhorovka. The first echelon panzerkeil belonged to Totenkopf, followed by armored wedges from Leibstandarte, and then Das Reich. With a short artillery and Kaytusha barrage to disrupt the German attack and to cover their move, Rotmistrov ordered the tanks of Fifth Guards Tank Army to attack with the sun at their backs, which made

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Healy, Kursk 1943: The Tide Turns In the East, p. 77.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen K. Rothwell, "SS Panzer Bloodbath at Kursk," Command: Military History, Strategy & Analysis, 36 (March 1996), p. 23.

German target acquisition more difficult.<sup>5</sup> The 18th Tank Corps, with the 170th Tank Brigade in the van, attacked Leibstandarte from the north in the Petrovka-Prelestnoe area. The 29th Tank Corps with infantry from the 9th Airborne Division also attacked Leibstandarte on either side of the Prokhorovka-Belgorod rail cutting and from the vicinity of Prokhorovka. The resulting battle was a furious tank melee "of proportions never before experienced."<sup>6</sup> In fact, the fighting was so violent that the Soviet tankers used ramming tactics. The Red Army tank commanders' wanted to get in close to nullify the German tank qualitative superiority. Overall, the 29th Tank Corps pushed the 2nd SS Panzer Grenadier Regiment back, but the Leibstandarte's Panzer Regiment counterattack restored the situation.<sup>7</sup>

By 9 a.m. the bulk of the armor on both sides was in the fray and destroyed tanks littered the battlefield. Fighter aircraft of the Red Army Air Force and the Luftwaffe vied for air superiority over the battlefield to allow air power to influence the raging fight below. Despite the aerial battle, some air support missions from both sides were able to destroy enemy armored vehicles. The 18th Tank Corps launched a new assault against Totenkopf in the vicinity of Andreevka. The Red Army tankers forced the SS men back but were unable to proceed any further because of intense crossfire. This apparent stalemate allowed Soviet forces to smash into Leibstandarte's left flank, which threaten to cut off the spearhead of the II SS Panzer Corps. The

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<sup>3</sup> Healy, Kursk, p. 80.

<sup>4</sup> David M. Glantz and Jonathan M. House, The Battle of Kursk, p. 151-152.

<sup>5</sup> Healy, Kursk, p. 78; Christopher Ailsby, SS Hell On the Eastern Front: The Waffen SS War In Russia, p. 80. The Kaytusha was a Soviet multiple-rocket launcher.

<sup>6</sup> Rudolf Lehmann, The Leibstandarte III: 1st SS Panzer Division Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler, Vol. III, 234; Rothwell, "SS Panzer Bloodbath," Command, p. 23.

<sup>7</sup> Glantz and House, Kursk, p. 185; Rothwell, "SS Panzer Bloodbath," Command, p. 25. Both regiments were subordinate units from the 1st SS Panzer Grenadier Division Leibstandarte.



panzer grenadiers of Leibstandarte were able to mass enough defensive fires to destroy the assaulting Red armor, and the 18th Tank Corps was forced over to the defensive.<sup>8</sup>

Leibstandarte faced yet another Soviet assault after having blunted two earlier. The 2nd Tank Corps mounted an attack at roughly 11:45 a.m. near the village of Storozhevoe, which was very close to Leibstandarte's southern boundary with Das Reich. Elements of the 2nd Tank Corps were successful in penetrating the German defensive line, but the SS tanks and men quickly repulsed the Red Army forces. In fact, the Waffen SS soldiers' counterattack 2nd Tank Corps combat ineffective by 1:30 p.m. Das Reich similarly turned back the nearly simultaneous attack of the 2nd Guards Tank Corps out of the Vinogradovka-Belenikhino area toward Iasnaia Poliana and Kalinin.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the seesaw nature of the battle, Hausser ordered Totenkopf to attack out of the Psel bridgehead, seize Hill 226, and attack toward Polezhaev. Elements of Totenkopf seized Hill 226 by 12:30 p.m., but they ran into two Soviet PTOP on the reverse slope. The fighting along the frontlines continued throughout the afternoon. The Red Army continued to pound the open left flank of the II SS Panzer Corps, as the III Panzer Corps had yet to arrive. The sheer weight of the Soviet armored vehicles and the rising losses kept the II SS Panzer Corps on the defensive.<sup>10</sup>

The III Panzer Corps, meanwhile, had succeeded in securing a firm bridgehead over the northern Donets River in the morning of July 12. Breith ordered a kampfguppe from the 19th Panzer Division to prepare to assault the rear of the Fifth Guards Tank Army; however, the Soviet Command took steps to prevent this. Vatutin ordered Rotmistrov to dispatch his reserve

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<sup>8</sup> "The Kursk Battle," Soviet Military Review no. 9, p. 14; Rothwell, "SS Panzer Bloodbath," Command Magazine, p. 26; Lehmann, Leibstandarte, III, 236.

<sup>9</sup> Rothwell, "SS Panzer Bloodbath," Command Magazine, p. 26.

to deal with the possible panzer corps linkup. Consequently, Rotmistrov dispatched three brigades under General Trufanov, his deputy, to contain and then eliminate the German bridgehead. The counterattacking forces consisted of the 11th Mechanized Brigade and 12th Mechanized Brigade from the 5th Guards Mechanized Corps and the 26th Guards Tank Brigade from the 2nd Guards Tank Corps. These additional forces tipped the scales against the III Panzer Corps and prevented a German linkup. At the same time their withdrawal forced the remainder of the 2nd Guards Tank Corps to withdraw, consolidate, and reorganize.<sup>11</sup> However, if von Manstein had employed the XXIV Panzer Corps in the II SS Panzer Corps sector, its pressure would probably have fixed Trufanov's forces in the Prokhorovka area. In this manner, the III Panzer Corps would have had a greater chance of linking up with the Fourth Panzer Army elements at Prokhorovka as planned. Similarly, if von Manstein had instead employed the XXIV Panzer Corps to further Kempf's attack, the probability of Kempf's and Hausser's forces linking up would have increased.

The close of July 12 brought more Soviet attacks, and General Hoth anticipated more Red Army attacks to come, as his units were reporting Soviet reinforcements and replacements all along the II SS Panzer Corps sector. Both Hoth and Rotmistrov felt that only the arrival of Breith's III Panzer Corps would decisively swing the advantage to the Germans. Because Breith's Corps was unable to push north, Totenkopf had the final action of the day as it succeeded in cutting the Prokhorovka-Kartachevka road. Totenkopf's prospects of further assault on Prokhorovka were grim, however, as the fresh 21st Tank and 10th Guards Mechanized Brigades were prepared to stop any German advance toward Prokhorovka. Furthermore, Hoth briefed von Manstein that there should be no further attacks to the north and that all available

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<sup>10</sup> Rothwell, "SS Panzer Bloodbath," *Command Magazine*, p. 26; Healy, *Kursk*, p. 85.

forces should be used to hit the enemy to the west. Thus, the largest tank engagement of the World War Two ended with both sides holding while dealing their enemy hammer blows. Neither had achieved its objectives—the Wehrmacht had not created the penetration of the Soviet defenses necessary to exploit to Kursk, nor had the Red Army cut off and destroyed the II SS Panzer Corps.<sup>12</sup>

Two enemy offensives had great impact on Adolf Hitler's decision making on continuing Operation CITADEL. The Anglo-American invasion of Sicily on July 10, codenamed Operation HUSKY, was the first. The preplanned Soviet counterattack in the Orel salient, codenamed Operation KUTUZOV, was the second. KUTUZOV began on July 12. The combination of two strategic counteroffensives put the German High Command in a quandary, as its strategic reserves were, for the most part, already engaged in the Battle of Kursk. Either Hitler would have to pull units out of CITADEL, or he would have to accept strategic risk with respect to his enemies' new attacks.

Operation HUSKY began with elements of the 8th British Army and 7th U.S. Army conducting an amphibious assault on Sicily's southern shore. Before this invasion, general opinion in Hitler's headquarters regarding Operation CITADEL and the situation on the Eastern Front had been positive. The invasion of Sicily, however, appeared to Hitler and majority of the other German senior leaders as the first step toward the feared invasion of Italy and then the European continent. The poor Italian combat performance also exacerbated Hitler's strategic fears and problems.<sup>13</sup> He had already moved to reinforce the beach defense of Sicily with German armor, which was unable to throw the Allies back into the water. Consequently, he had

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<sup>11</sup> Glantz and House, *Kursk*, p. 181; Rothwell, "SS Panzer Bloodbath," *Command Magazine*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>12</sup> Lehmann, *Liebstandarte*, III, 238; Rothwell, "SS Panzer Bloodbath," *Command*, pp. 31-34.

<sup>13</sup> Robin Cross, *Citadel: The Battle of Kursk*, pp. 220-222.

to order General Hube to conduct a phased withdrawal of German forces to the Italian mainland. Moreover, this failure to defend Sicily put the Italian mainland in danger of falling to the Allies.

The potential end of Mussolini's empire, the possible loss of an old ally, and the apparent defeat of Model's Ninth Army greatly alarmed Hitler. First and foremost, he felt that the Mediterranean Theater needed more units to prevent any Allied landings on the continent and to preserve his old Fascist partner. Hitler also feared that the Allies would attempt to open another front in the Balkans, as Winston Churchill advocated. In order to bolster Italian Fascism, his initial solution to these problems was to transfer politically reliable units to aid Mussolini's regime. The problem was that these units were fighting at Prokhorovka at that time. Consequently, Hitler chose to pull out the three premiere SS divisions from Operation CITADEL to bolster the Italian defense.

Operation KUTUZOV opened on July 12 when General Sokolovsky's West Front moved against the northern face of the Orel salient and when General Popov's Bryansk Front hurled itself against northern and eastern portions of the Orel salient. This attack placed heavy pressure upon General Rudolf Schmidt's Second Panzer Army and the rear of the already engaged Ninth Army. Moreover, KUTUZOV threatened the supply base of the entire Army Group Center. At the same time the Stavka coordinated a continuous, massive, and successful partisan effort against the German lines of communication within the Orel salient.<sup>14</sup> The combined pressure forced the Ninth Army to cease offensive operations and reinforce the Second Panzer Army with some of its best units. Hitler also gave General Model overall command of both the Ninth and the Second Panzer Armies to complete an orderly withdrawal.

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<sup>14</sup> A. Zvenzlovsky, "A Crushing Blow" Soviet Military Review no. 6, p. 17; S. P. Ivanov, "Completing the Turning Point in the War," Voyenno-Istoricheskiy Zhurnal, in Translation of USSR Military Affairs, p. 19; Paul Carell, Scorched Earth: The Russian-German War, 1943-1944, p. 83; A. Luchinsky, "On Certain Questions in the

The success of CITADEL had appeared very remote as Operation KUTUZOV ended any ideas of continued attack from the northern face of the Kursk salient. From Hitler's perspective, von Manstein's units had suffered substantial damage in sustained battles, and he did not want to sacrifice more combat power with little or no chance of victory. The twin offensives of his enemies would force Hitler to make a decision in short order.<sup>15</sup>

While the Allies were attacking in Sicily and Orel, von Manstein believed that the offensive still had merit and requested that the OKH approve his employment of Nehling's Panzer Corps to increase the power and impetus of his attack. Hitler briefly approved the release of the XXIV Panzer Corps, while the German High Command debated the strategic situation. Meanwhile, Leibstandarte and Das Reich attacked 18th Tank Corps west of Prokhorovka. Rotmistrov countered by sending in the 10th and the 24th Mechanized Brigades, which were his final reserves from his second echelon, to parry this new threat. The result was a confused and deadly tank melee that was very similar to the previous day.

The losses from the fighting over July 12 and 13 were extensive on both sides. The German forces destroyed a full 50 percent of Fifth Guards Tank Army during the two day fight. More specifically, the Germans eliminated over 250 Soviet tanks with the heaviest losses coming in the 18th Tank Corps, 29th Tank Corps, 2nd Guards Tank Corps, and 5th Guards Tank Corps. The Red Army also damaged many Wehrmacht tanks, but a considerable number of these were repairable. The German surrender of the field left these vehicles behind. However, the most significant losses of German armor strength had already occurred prior to July 12 during the

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Development of Strategy and Operational Art in the Battle of Kursk," Voyenno-Istoricheskiy Zhurnal June 1983 in Translations of USSR Military Affairs, p. 30.

<sup>15</sup>Alan Clark, Barbarossa: The Russian-German Conflict, 1941-45, pp. 337-338.

penetration of the Soviet fortifications. The Red Army, as it retained control of the battlefield, repaired many of its damaged tanks and used them in subsequent counterattacks.<sup>16</sup>

Hitler ordered von Manstein and von Kluge to report to him at his command headquarters in East Prussia on July 13. He expressed to them his reservations about Sicily, Italy as a whole, the Soviet attacks in the Orel, and the growing indications of a Soviet attack against Army Group South's weak right wing. Von Manstein argued not only for the continuation of the offensive in his sector but for Model to resume the attack against the northern face of the Kursk salient as well. Von Kluge, who had to contend with the Soviet Operation KUTUZOV, desperately needed Model's units to shore up the crumbling Second Panzer Army. Despite von Kluge's reservations, von Manstein convinced Hitler to allow him to continue the attack.<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile, the German Ninth and Second Panzer Armies carried out a successful retrograde movement back to the HAGEN LINE. This maneuver conceded that the northern assault group had lost the ability to close its half of the encirclement, and, consequently, the German forces no longer had the possibility of successfully completing Operation CITADEL as originally envisioned. The German tanks and assault guns, which were hidden in parkfronts of their own, took a heavy toll on the Red Army forces in KUTUZOV, destroying many of the 500 recently produced tanks of General Badanov's Fourth Tank Army.<sup>18</sup>

The Red Army showed signs of building up another offensive, but this one would come along the Mius River to the south of the Kursk fighting. Even worse for Germany, intelligence indicated that the forces that remained to defend the Mius River sector were insufficient to

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<sup>16</sup> Peter Strassner, European Volunteers: 5 SS Panzer Division Wiking, p. 119; U.S. Army Concepts Analysis Agency, Kursk Operation Simulation and Validation Exercise – Phase III (KOSAVE II), p. 5-12; Healy, Kursk, pp. 85-88; Steve Zaloga and Peter Sarson, T-34/76 Medium Tank 1941-45, p. 34. Many of these tanks were rebuilt up to four times to keep them in the fight.

<sup>17</sup> Healy, Kursk, p. 88.

<sup>18</sup> Cross, Citadel, p. 237; Healy, Kursk, p. 83.

counter the Red Army forces that were preparing to attack. Hitler had dreaded this situation. Not only were von Manstein's forces that were attacking the southern shoulder of the Kursk salient and the elements holding the Crimea now in jeopardy, but Soviet action threatened the mineral resources in the Donbas that Hitler felt were vital to the German war effort. More problematic, Hitler also knew that the 27th and 53rd Armies of Konev's Steppe Front, supported by 4th Guards Tank Corps and 1st Mechanized Corps respectively began closing into assembly areas around Oboyan. Similarly, the Soviet 47th Army moved behind the 7th Guards Army.<sup>19</sup> This massive reinforcement of fresh units meant that there was little or no hope of further German offensive success at Kursk. Because of the threat in the south and his doubt of CITADEL's success, Hitler ordered the XXIV Panzer Corps back south to parry the threat.

The Soviets launched their counteroffensive along the Mius River on July 17. The Southwestern Front, commanded by Colonel General Tolbukhin, attacked the heavily fortified Mius River line defenses. Southwestern Front controlled five infantry armies, an air army, two mechanized corps, three tank brigades and a cavalry corps. Southwestern Front's early success forced von Manstein to draw off more forces from the southern face of the Kursk salient, including the 23rd Panzer Division, the II SS Panzer Corps, and the aforementioned XXIV Panzer Corps. Local counterattacks proved costly and ineffective against Tolbukhin's forces, but the reinforcements managed to stop the Red Army offensive.<sup>20</sup> However, this attack merely drew the German mobile units away from the point of the next Soviet counterattack—Operation RUMANTSYEV.

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<sup>19</sup> Glantz and House, Kursk, pp. 222-223. The 4th Guard Tank and 1st Mechanized Corps had almost 400 tanks between them.

<sup>20</sup> Carell, Scorched Earth, p. 297; John Erickson, The Road To Berlin: Continuing the History of Stalin's War with Germany, pp. 115-116; Cross, Citadel, p. 237; Strassner, Volunteers, p. 119-121.

The Stavka had originally envisioned the simultaneous launching of Operation RUMANTSYEV and Operation KUTUZOV, but the ferocity of the fighting in the Voronezh Front sector precluded this. RUMANTSYEV's objective was to counterattack and seize Belgorod and Kharkov. Marshal Zhukov's vision was to achieve a rapid and deep penetration with powerful assault groupings. The Red Army shrouded the entire operation by a massive deception, or maskirovka, effort. On August 3 the Soviets launched the counterattack, which caught the German forces off-guard strategically, operationally, and tactically. Von Manstein and the OKH could not believe the Red Army forces that had just taken the brunt of the CITADEL offensive could recover and go over to the offensive so quickly.

By the end of the first day of Operation RUMANTSYEV the Soviet First and Fifth Guards Tank Armies broke through the second line of German defenses to a depth of fifteen miles. These tank armies also demonstrated that the Red Army could successfully use them as mobile groups, as these two armies advanced away from the combined arms armies, attacked the German operational reserves, and attacked the flanks and rear of the main Wehrmacht defense line. The German forces that Hitler had moved to counter the Mius River offensive were countermarched to stop the latest Soviet attack. Red Army forces retook Belgorod on August 5 and the Steppe Front pierced the external defenses of Kharkov on August 13. Four days later the fighting reached the suburbs of Kharkov. After a short period of bloody house-to-house fighting, von Manstein ordered the city abandoned on August 22 in order to avoid losing the army as Germany had lost Sixth Army in Stalingrad. Army Group South conducted this withdrawal against the directions of the OKH. Even more ominous for the future of the



Wehrmacht, Hitler very grudgingly gave von Manstein permission to withdraw behind the Dneiper River on September 15.<sup>21</sup>

The strategic situation had greatly changed after the Battle of Kursk. The Red Army had exacted an immense toll of German men and material during the initial defense, and their counterattacks also dealt the Wehrmacht heavy blows all along Army Group South. The lead Soviet elements also pushed the front 300 kilometers to the east of the summer 1943 start lines in some areas and regained a total of 395,000 square kilometers of territory. The German forces would never again mount a strategic offensive on the Eastern Front.<sup>22</sup> The Red Army would inexorably push west to Berlin for the rest of the war. Politically, the Axis minor partners began to look for ways of disengaging from the war after Kursk. Moreover, the psychological impact of the battle was immense. The German armed forces' morale continued to decline and morale plummeted within the Third Reich, as the Nazi propagandists were unable to hide yet another German defeat from the German people. Conversely, the Red Army and Soviet Union's morale soared due to their latest feat of arms.

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<sup>21</sup> Cross, Citadel, p. 238; Ivanov, "Turning Point," USSR Military Affairs, p. 19; Luchinsky, "Operational Art in the Battle of Kursk," USSR Military Affairs, p. 32; Strassner, Volunteers, p. 123-125; Cross, Citadel, pp. 241-244; Healy, Kursk, p. 86. Maskirovka operations are those that attempt to deceive the enemy in some form especially with regards to the strength and intentions of the Red Army. Manstein feared that holding would leave his troops engulfed on all sides.

<sup>22</sup> Ivanov, "Turning Point," USSR Military Affairs, p. 19; Cross, Kursk, p. 252.

## CHAPTER 6

### ASSESSMENT

The Battle of Kursk ended with both the German and Soviet forces with numerous casualties and destroyed vehicles, but the Red Army had the strength to counterattack and push the Wehrmacht west. On the other hand, the German Army did not have to the strength to hold against the Soviets. To ascertain the validity of the von Manstein's claim that Hitler threw away a victory, however, one must conduct an assessment of both the Red Army and the Wehrmacht forces involved. Additionally, one must address the questions of what von Manstein could have accomplished and at what cost.

The myth of the "Lost Victory" would begin with Hitler's decision to halt the attack over von Manstein's immediate protests. Von Manstein felt that he could still have achieved victory in his sector. Territory did not interest the field marshal; indeed, the capture of additional Soviet territory would probably have only worsened the German position. What he wanted was to continue attacking in order to smash the enemy's armored reserves and consequently to prevent their use in new offensives.<sup>1</sup>

Von Manstein's insistence on continuing the offensive raises the question of what would renewed attacks have accomplished? He could have put greater emphasis on actions such as reducing the Gostishchevo-Liski pocket with the added combat power of the XXIV Panzer Corps, emphasizing retention of terrain to facilitate vehicle recovery, conducting a time-phased withdrawal back to Belgorod, and releasing forces to other threatened areas when the retrograde movement was complete. Similarly, this begs the question of what the German forces were capable of accomplishing. Although they continued to be combat effective for several weeks of

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<sup>1</sup> Erich von Manstein, Lost Victories: The War Memoirs of Hitler's Most Brilliant General, p. 449.

fighting after the halt order, the overall condition of the German forces in and around the Kursk salient was marginal and precluded more attacks.

The soldiers in General O. von Knobelsdorff's XXXXVIII Panzer Corps had a low level of readiness, having faced two weeks of continuous combat. The 3rd Panzer Division continually lost ground in the face of enemy attacks that were similar to those that other units were turning back. This division, in fact, had only thirty armored vehicles by July 17, and the 11th Panzer Division was in roughly the same shape. Grossdeutschland Panzer Grenadier Division, however, was capable of offensive action and conducted operations after July 17 in both the Orel salient and later after Hitler moved it back to Army Group South.<sup>2</sup>

General Breith's III Panzer Corps was in better condition than von Knobelsdorff's XXXXVIII Panzer Corps, as it was engaged in less damaging combat than what had occurred on other sectors of the battlefield. Part of Army Detachment Kempf, III Panzer Corps had not attacked directly into the extensive Soviet echeloned defenses as other panzer units had. In fact, Breith's troops had performed very well and, by using a clever deception operation, had managed to gain a penetration across the Donets near Rzhavets. In the following drive to Prokhorovka, the III Corps encircled a substantial group of Soviet forces in Gostishchevo-Liski area. This pocket included the entire 69th Army and two independent tank corps.<sup>3</sup>

Because of its offensive capability, the most important German unit to analyze is Hausser's II SS Panzer Corps. The three divisions that primarily made up this formation—the 1st SS Panzer Grenadier Division Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler, the 2nd SS Panzer Grenadier Division Das Reich, and the 3rd SS Panzer Grenadier Division Totenkopf—had taken substantial

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<sup>2</sup> F. W. Mellenthin, Panzer Battles: A Study of the Employment of Armor in the Second World War, pp. 267-276, 271-272; Helmuth Spaeter, The History of the Panzerkorps Grossdeutschland, II, 133 and 146.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Carell, Scorched Earth: The Russian-German War, 1943-1944, pp. 83-84; Robin Cross, Citadel: The Battle of Kursk, p. 226.

losses of men and material but were still capable of minor offensive action. In fact, the panzer regiment of Das Reich helped to form the Gostishchevo-Liski pocket by establishing contact with the 7th Panzer Division of the III Panzer Corps on July 15. Thus, the SS Panzer Corps was launching attacks until it withdrew under Hitler's orders. These offensive actions show that both the SS Panzer Corps and the III Panzer Corps were still capable of combat operations prior to the Hitler's halt order on the July 17.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, the fight through the Red Army echeloned defenses and the clash at Prokhorovka to the Soviets had drained resources and morale.

Any judgement concerning von Manstein's position must also consider the question of reserve forces and their condition. Von Manstein had a significant unit that remained unused—General W. Nehling's XXIV Panzer Corps. It had moved up from the Kharkov area to the vicinity of Belgorod on July 10. The XXIV Panzer Corps consisted of two experienced divisions—the 5th SS Panzer Grenadier Division Wiking and the 17th Panzer Division, which, like all the others at the beginning of Kursk, were at full strength in men and material. Wiking, however, had three panzer grenadier regiments instead of the usual two regiments; consequently, its mechanized infantry strength was significantly greater than a regular panzer or panzer grenadier division. Von Manstein, however, had not employed the XXIV Panzer Corps before Hitler redirected it back to Isyum on July 16.<sup>5</sup> Because of Hitler's decision, von Manstein lost the availability of a powerful mobile formation that could have been very useful in the battle.

The regular infantry divisions that took part in the fighting sustained heavy damage. Most lost one third of their troop strength over the course of the battle. One of the reasons was that they were not fully equipped with modern anti-tank weapons and were consequently not

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<sup>4</sup> James Lucas, Das Reich: The Military Role of the 2nd SS Division, p. 112.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Healy, Kursk 1943: The Tide Turn in the East, p. 72-73; Albert Seaton, The Russo-German War 1941-45, p. 358; Peter Strassner, European Volunteers: 5 SS Panzer Division Wiking, p. 119.

well suited to deal with the Soviet armor. Because of this, the infantry divisions did not fare as well as the panzer divisions when they attacked through the Red Army echeloned defenses.<sup>6</sup> These losses would have large ramifications as the battle and the war continued, since infantry replacements were simply not available to bring unit strength back up to normal levels.

In order to analyze Hitler's decision, we must examine what the withdrawn units did elsewhere. In fact, most of the units that Hitler took away from Manstein's control on July 17 did not actually go to Italy. Hitler ordered Leibstandarte out of the fighting at Kursk to support the counterattack of the Mius line and to later entrain for Italy. When Leibstandarte began rail movement to Italy on August 3, its mission was to act as a core for the creation of a new and more fervently Fascist Italian army that would bolster Benito Mussolini's crumbling empire. While serving in this role, it only conducted anti-partisan operations in northern Italy. The German Commanders did not even use Leibstandarte in halting the Allied advance in Italy. This clearly was a waste of one of the German military's most potent units. The 1st SS Panzer Grenadier Division would move back to the Eastern Front in November 1943.<sup>7</sup> While Leibstandarte was in Italy, the remainder of the II SS Panzer Corps remained in von Manstein's Army Group and participated in the fourth and final battle for Kharkov.

Hitler also transferred the Grossdeutschland Panzer Grenadier Division, the strongest in von Knobelsdorff's XXXXVIII Panzer Corps, to von Kluge's Center Army Group. Hitler gave von Kluge this elite formation to help fight in the Orel salient.<sup>8</sup> The Soviet attack into this area had put great pressure on the Center Army Group, but von Manstein needed Grossdeutschland to finish his offensive operations more than von Kluge needed it to make a retrograde movement.

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<sup>6</sup> Seaton, Russo-German War 1941-45, p. 233.

<sup>7</sup> Rudolf Lehmann, The Leibstandarte III: The 1st SS Panzer Division Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler, Vol. III, p. 256; Matthew Cooper and James Lucas, Hitler's Elite: Liebstandarte SS 1933-45, p. 114-115.

It would also take a large amount of time for Grossdeutschland to withdraw from the front line in the south, move to the Orel salient, and then participate in any operations. Therefore, the critical period in the Orel salient had passed by the time Grossdeutschland could make any substantial contribution to von Kluge's withdrawal to the Hagen Line.<sup>9</sup> Once von Kluge's Army Group was back to this defensive position, the OKH transferred this unit back to von Manstein's control. The remainder of the XXXXVIII Panzer Corps remained under von Manstein's command, but it received little rest after the battle. Breith's III Panzer Corps remained in Army Group South in a role similar to von Knobelsdorff's corps.

Hitler also took Nehling's XXIV Panzer Corps away from von Manstein. The two panzer divisions that made up this corps had moved up behind Hoth's Fourth Panzer Army to prepare to exploit any successes. Over von Manstein's protests, Hitler ordered him to transfer the XXIV Panzer Corps to reinforce the 1st Panzer Army, which was holding the right wing of Army Group South and faced a major attack by two Soviet Fronts. What Hitler really sought with that transfer was protection of Germany's control of the Donets River basin. To this end, Nehling's Panzer Corps fought on the Mius River line to counter a new Soviet offensive, but von Manstein lost further operational flexibility. Hitler should have left Nehling's Corps under von Manstein's control to facilitate the greatest concentration of combat forces possible to end the more important battle.<sup>10</sup>

The condition of Soviet forces also has an immense impact on what von Manstein could have accomplished. In this vein, the Red Army faced several problems after July 12. The Wehrmacht had the 69th Army, 2nd Tank Corps, and 2nd Guard Tank Corps encircled in the

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<sup>8</sup> Janusz Piekalkiewicz, Operation "Citadel" Kursk and Orel: The Greatest Tank Battle of the Second World War, p. 205.

<sup>9</sup> The Hagen Line was the name for the German defensive position at the base of the Orel salient.

Gostishchevo-Liski area, and this was the most serious Soviet issue. If the German Army eliminated this group, a large amount of available Soviet combat power would be lost. Similarly, liquidation of this pocket would have helped the Germans by improving the ratio of combat power after the battle. The potential to destroy the units in this pocket was lost when Hitler began the transfer of von Manstein's units.<sup>11</sup> Thus, Hitler's faulty decision making assisted the Red Army by letting the units in the pocket escape to fight another day.

Another Red Army issue was that the heavy fighting severely depleted many units, including Rotmistrov's 5th Guards Tank Army and Zhadov's 5th Guards Combined Arms Army. For example, the Battle of Prokhorovka all but destroyed the 29th and 18th Tank Corps. Overall Soviet tank losses reached 1500 vehicles or roughly half of the initial Soviet combat vehicles within the Kursk salient. The Red Army, however, had the advantage of retaining the Prokhorovka battlefield and was able to repair and cannibalize hundreds of vehicles. Soviet tank strength went back up to 2750 vehicles by August 3 due to the repair of damaged vehicles. Replacing experienced tank crews was a difficult problem, but sheer numerical superiority would prove too much for the Germans after Kursk. Soviet industry was also producing about three times the number of front-line tanks that the Third Reich was turning out.

The Stavka had committed a significant portion of Soviet reserves during the course of Kursk, including much of Konev's Steppe Front. One of the best infantry armies, Fifth Guards Army under Zhadov, had been employed with the Fifth Guards Tank Army and two attached independent tank corps. In fact, Konev only controlled three out of his original eight armies at the end of the Battle of Prokhorovka. The units he still controlled were 27th Army with 4th

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<sup>10</sup> Cross, Citadel, pp. 228 and 245; Earl F. Ziemke, Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East, p. 117.

<sup>11</sup> Geoffrey Jukes, Kursk: The Clash of Armour, pp. 106-107.

Guard Tank Corps, 53rd Army with 1st Mechanized Corps, and 47th Army. Konev had protested the piecemeal employment of his unit but using his Armies as reinforcements proved to be one of the best decisions in the battle.<sup>12</sup> After the Germans began their withdrawal, Konev would take control of the sector of the front to the south of Vatutin for the counterattack phase. Moreover, Zhukov could have used the three armies that Steppe Front still controlled as reinforcements anytime during the Battle of Kursk, and they were in immediate supporting distance. These armies were approximately fifty miles to the east of the battlefield; thus, they would take roughly one day to reinforce any threatened Soviet sector.

Once the Germans broke through the initial Soviet defenses, combat results favored the Wehrmacht. While it is true that the engagement severely weakened the involved units on both sides, the German units were able to maintain their tank strength at a nearly constant level after the first three days of fighting. The number of available German tanks after the battle at Prokhorovka remained at a relatively steady state, and the panzer units involved had been attacking for nine days at that point. Similarly, Hoth's Fourth Panzer Army was able to take enemy territory throughout the Battle of Kursk, but the width of penetration steadily decreased as its depth increased. Thus, it was not beyond the ability of Army Group South to have continued holding operations while the uncommitted XXIV Panzer Corps reduced the 69th Army.<sup>13</sup>

The Germans could not have attained the outcome they needed to bring Operation CITADEL to a successful conclusion. They could no longer pinch off the Kursk salient due to the local pressure of the Orel offensive, the threat of an impending offensive on the Mius River, and the remaining commitment of additional reserves. The Allied invasion of Sicily also took

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<sup>12</sup> Jukes, Kursk, p. 106; Cross, Citadel, p. 194.



Hitler's attention away from Kursk, and he made units redeploy to Italy. This, of course, weakened the effort at Kursk. The German units were also too exhausted and too damaged to contemplate driving deeper into Soviet territory, or to take all the territory south of the Psel River, as von Manstein advocated, would not have been possible. Holding the German position on the southern portion of the Kursk salient without removal of forces, however, would have improved the situation. If von Manstein had forced the surrounded Red Army units to surrender, it would have weakened the Soviet counteroffensive plans to some degree. For example, reducing the Gostishchevo-Liski pocket would have eliminated the 69th Army. The Second Tank Corps and the Second Guards Tank Corps were also in the same pocket. Destroying these two experienced Soviet tank corps, which together were approximately equal in numbers of tanks to four panzer divisions, and an entire infantry army, which had an approximate strength of 50,000 men, would have greatly weakened overall Soviet strength. In fact, the Soviet General Staff Study on the Battle of Kursk stated that if the Germans had accomplished this, it would have set the conditions to successfully extricate the German Fourth Panzer Army from the battle. Eliminating these units would have helped the German cause, but would not have produced victory. Moreover, the German Army would have had to accomplish this shortly after Prokhorovka as the Stavka ordered those forces fight their way out on July 16 in order to avoid encirclement.<sup>14</sup>

The Wehrmacht should have also placed greater emphasis on retaining possession of the battlefield to recover more damaged vehicles. After previous engagements, the German forces controlled the battlefields after the fighting and had consequently managed to keep their

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<sup>13</sup> Theodor Busse, The Zitadelle Offensive, p. 35.

<sup>14</sup> Albert Z. Conner and Robert G. Poirier, The Red Army Order of Battle in the Great Patriotic War, p. 73; David Glantz, Soviet Defensive Tactics at Kursk, July 1943, no. 11, p. 5; Glantz and Orenstein, The Battle for Kursk: The Soviet General Staff Study, p. 105.

available tank strength at a relatively constant level by recovering and repairing damaged vehicles. In fact, the Germans had returned over 600 damaged tanks back into the fight over the period of July 5 to 18, so holding the battlefield would have given them the chance to recover or cannibalize many more.<sup>15</sup> Stronger emphasis in this area would have also kept the Red Army from doing the same thing. Because the Soviets had possessed the battlefields where the majority of the armor battles had occurred, they were able to double their available tank strength.

Field Marshal von Manstein stated that the Battle of Stalingrad was certainly a turning point in the war and, grave though the loss of Sixth Army undoubtedly was, it still need not have meant that the war in the east—and ipso facto the war as a whole—was irretrievably lost. He thought was conceivable to force a stalemate in the east. This might have been true after the Battle of Stalingrad, as a German victory at Kursk would have smashed the same Soviet forces that would later drive to Berlin and, therefore, delayed the Red Army's advance at least until replacement forces with experienced leaders could have been formed. The magnitude of the Wehrmacht's defeat at Kursk, however, ended any hope of a stalemate in the east. Therefore, the assertions of von Manstein and Carell that Hitler's decision to halt the offensive was "throwing away a victory" are invalid. The Wehrmacht simply could not have salvaged a victory of any strategic significance at Kursk. In fact, the best the German forces could have accomplished was to withdraw in a better situation than they did. Operation CITADEL had also depleted the offensive power of the panzerwaffe to the point that anything short of a massive destruction of Soviet military forces akin to the Barbarossa encirclement battles could rectify the situation. Moreover, the Red Army was still numerically superior to the Wehrmacht and had gained valued experience, improved combat doctrine, improved weapons quality, and increased the quantity of

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<sup>15</sup> U.S. Army Concepts Analysis Agency, Kursk Operation Simulation and Validation Exercise – Phase III

their weaponry in all areas. Thus, a German victory of a magnitude necessary to regain the strategic initiative was all but impossible.<sup>16</sup>

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(KOSAVE II), p. 5-14 through 5-15.

<sup>16</sup> Heinz Guderian, Panzer Leader, p. 302; Piekalkiewicz, Kursk and Orel, p. 272. There were, however, possibilities to lessen the severity of the failure of Operation CITADEL. First, Army Detachment Kempf should have followed II SS Panzer Corps and assumed the mission of guarding Fourth Panzer Army's eastern flank without attacking east of Belgorod. Second, von Manstein should have employed his reserve Panzer Corps on the night of 11/12 July. Finally, Hitler should have allowed him a free hand to finish the offensive, as any strategic movement of units from the Eastern Front could not outweigh the importance of the battle in which these forces were already engaged. Kursk would still be the last time the panzer divisions were at this level of relative combat power, but the battle did not have to give the Soviets the strategic initiative and psychological advantage for the rest of the war.

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