II

CRIMEAN SUMMER, STALINGRAD WINTER

It is a paradox of campaigning in Russia that, though winter destroys armies, it is the coming of spring that halts operations. The thaw, saturating the suddenly unfrozen topsoil with thirty inches of snow melt, turns the dirt roads liquid and the surface of the steppe to swamp, the *rasputitsa*, 'internal seas' of mud which clog all movement. Motorised transport buries itself above the axles in bog; even the hardy local ponies and the light *panje* wagons they draw flounder in the bottomless mire. In mid-March 1942 both the Red Army and the *Ostheer* accepted defeat by the seasons. An enforced truce descended on the Russian front until the beginning of May.

Both armies made use of it to repair the losses that winter and the fighting had inflicted. The Stavka calculated that there were 16 million men of military age in Russia and that the strength of the Red Army could be raised to 9 million in 1942; allowing for 3 million already taken prisoner and a million dead, there would still be enough men to fill 400 divisions and provide replacements. Many of the divisions were pitifully weak, but a surplus was found to create a central reserve, while the evacuated factories behind the Urals had produced 4500 tanks, 3000 aircraft, 14,000 guns and 50,000 mortars during the winter months.

The Germans were also enlarging their army. In January the *Ersatzheer* (Replacement Army) raised thirteen divisions from new recruits and 'comb-outs'; another nine were created shortly afterwards. For the first time women volunteers (*Stabshelferinnen*) were inducted to release male clerks and drivers to the infantry in January 1942, and volunteer auxiliaries (*Hilfsfreiwillige*) were also found among Russian prisoners, most of whom turned

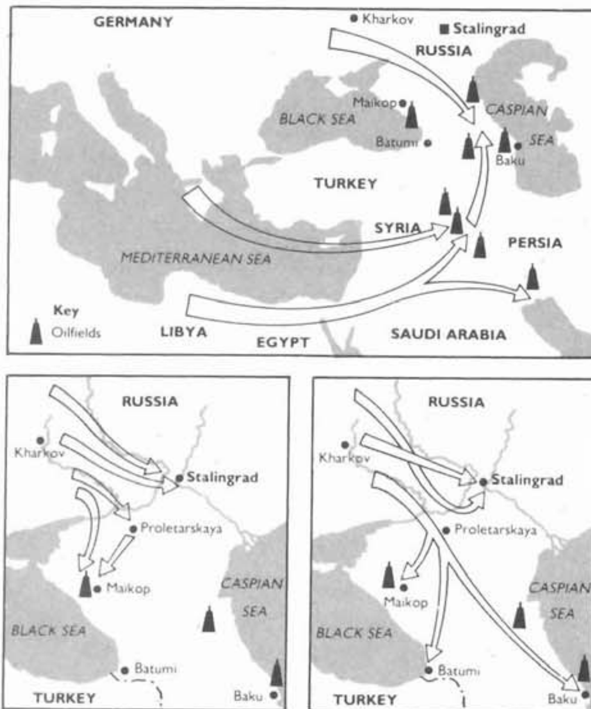
coat as an alternative to starvation. In this way the 900,000 losses suffered during the winter were made good, though a deficiency of 600,000 remained by April. It was concealed by maintaining divisions in existence even when their infantry strength had fallen by as much as a third; tank, artillery and horse strength had also fallen. By April the *Ostheer* was short of 1600 Mark III and IV tanks, 2000 guns and 7000 anti-tank guns. Of the half-million horses the army had brought to Russia, a half had died by the spring of 1942.

Hitler was nevertheless convinced that the force which remained sufficed to finish Russia off and was determined to launch his decisive offensive as soon as the ground hardened. While Stalin had persuaded himself that the Germans would strike again at Moscow – a blow he was certain would be weakened by Germany's need to deal with a 'Second Front' in the west – Hitler had an entirely contrary intention. The point of the Kaiser's final offensive into Russia in 1918 had been to take possession of its natural wealth. The wheatlands, mines and, now more important than ever, oilfields had always lain in the south. It was in that direction, into the lands beyond the Crimea, on the river Volga and in the Caucasus, that Hitler now planned to send the Panzers for the summer campaign of 1942, to recoup and add to the great economic conquests brought to Germany by the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk twenty-four years earlier.

The front that the *Ostheer* had drawn across western Russia in November, at the moment when its 'final' offensive against Moscow had been launched, had run almost directly north–south from the Gulf of Finland to the Black Sea, bulging eastward between Demyansk, to Moscow's north, and Kursk, to the capital's south. By May it had assumed a much less tidy configuration. Because of the effect of Stalin's winter counter-offensive, it no longer touched Moscow's outskirts and was now also dented in three places. Between Demyansk and Rzhev an enormous bulge protruded westward, reaching almost as far as Smolensk on the Moscow highway, and a reverse loop enclosed a pocket around Demyansk itself which had to be supplied by air. South and west of Moscow another bulge nearly enclosed Rzhev and almost touched Roslavl, on the Smolensk–Stalingrad railway. At Izyum, south of the great industrial city of Kharkov, yet another pocket bulged westward to cut the line of the Kiev railway and impede entry to Rostov, gateway to the Caucasus. The Red Army's sacrificial attacks of January to March had not lacked result.

Hitler briskly dismissed the danger that the two Moscow salients offered to his front. The Demyansk pocket, he calculated, cost the Red Army more to guard than it cost him to maintain; his occupation of the Rzhev re-entrant kept the threat to Moscow alive; and the Roslavl bulge was unimportant. As for the situation at Izyum, it would be resolved automatically by the opening of Army Group South's drive past Rostov into the Caucasus. The outline of that offensive (codenamed 'Blue') was discussed by Hitler with Halder and OKH on 28 March 1942 and issued in greater detail as Führer Directive No. 41 on 5 April. It comprised five separate operations. In the Crimea, Eleventh Army, commanded by Manstein, would destroy the Russian army in the Kerch peninsula and then reduce Sevastopol, still holding out after five months of siege, by bombardment. Bock (who had

assumed command of Army Group South after recovering from illness) was to 'pinch out' the Izyum pocket and enclose Voronezh on the Don in armoured pincers; he had nine Panzer and six motorised divisions for the task (as well as fifty-two less reliable Romanian, Hungarian, Italian, Slovak and Spanish divisions). Once that had been accomplished, Army Group Centre would drive down the Don and cross the steppe to Stalingrad on the Volga, joined by a subsidiary force advancing from Kharkov; finally its spearheads would drive into the Caucasus (as the Kaiser's army had done in 1918), penetrate the mountain range between the Black and Caspian Seas and reach Baku, centre of the Soviet oil industry. To protect these conquests, Hitler intended to construct an impermeable East Wall. 'Russia will then be to us', he told Goebbels, 'what India is to the British.'



Top: *The Axis grand strategy for 1942, aimed at securing the oil fields of the Middle East.* **Above left:** *Führer Directive 41, Hitler's original, limited plan for the summer of 1942.* **Above, right:** *Führer Directive 45, Hitler's extended plans for 1942.*

The economic arguments for the operation were immeasurable. Hitler declared to his generals that a success in the south would release forces to complete the isolation and capture of Leningrad in the north. However, the point of 'Blue' was to capture Russia's oil. Not only did Hitler need it for Germany (he confessed to intimates of nightmares in which he saw the Ploesti fields burning out of control from end to end); he also wanted to deny it to Stalin. The economic damage Barbarossa had already inflicted on the Soviet Union was immense. By mid-October 1941 the *Ostheer* had occupied territory (which it was to retain until the summer of 1944) where 45 per cent of the Soviet population lived, 64 per cent of the Soviet Union's coal was extracted, and 47 per cent of its grain crops, more than two-thirds of its pig-iron, steel and rolled metals and 60 per cent of its aluminium were produced. The frontier evacuation of factories (of which 303 alone produced ammunition) behind the Urals had saved essential industrial capacity from capture, though at the expense of a grave interruption of supply; but the loss, even the impairment, of the oil

supply would prove catastrophic, as Hitler well knew. The 'General Plan' of Führer Directive No. 41 stated quite baldly: 'Our aim is to wipe out the entire defence potential remaining to the Soviets, and to cut them off, as far as possible, from their most important centres of war industry. . . . First, therefore, all available forces will be concentrated in the southern sector, with the aim of destroying the enemy before the Don in order to secure the Caucasian oilfields and the passes through the Caucasian mountains themselves.'

'Blue' opened as soon as the ground was hard enough to bear tanks, on 8 May, with Manstein's attack into the Kerch peninsula of the Crimea. A week later it was over and 170,000 Russians had been taken prisoner; only Sevastopol, which would not fall until 2 July, still held out in the Crimea. Meanwhile, however, the main stage of 'Blue', codenamed 'Fridericus', had been compromised. A Russian counter-attack towards Kharkov, a main tank-building centre as well as a key industrial city, began on 12 May, anticipating Bock's 'pinching out' of the Izyum pocket. In a panic he warned Hitler that 'Fridericus' would have to be abandoned for a frontal defence of Kharkov and, when Hitler dismissed the interruption of his plan as a 'minor blemish', retorted, 'This is no "blemish" – it's a matter of life and death.' Hitler was unmoved: he repeated that the situation would resolve itself as soon as 'Fridericus' gathered weight and merely insisted that the launch date be advanced one day. Events proved him right. Kleist, commanding First Panzer Army, easily penetrated the Russians' line north of their Kharkov thrust, joined up with Paulus's Sixth Army south of Kharkov on 22 May and thus achieved yet another of the encirclements which had dismembered the Red Army the previous year. By the beginning of June 239,000 prisoners had been captured and 1240 tanks destroyed on the Kharkov battlefield. Then followed two subsidiary operations codenamed 'Wilhelm' and 'Fridericus II', which set out to destroy the Izyum pocket and the remnants of the Russian forces isolated by the Kharkov battle respectively. Both were over by 28 June.

That was D-Day for 'Blue' proper. It was to be mounted by four armies in line abreast, the Sixth, Fourth Panzer, First Panzer and Seventeenth, the first two armies subordinated to one army group, the second two armies subordinated to another. Bock continued to command Army Group South, and List, who had begun his rise in the Polish campaign, commanded the new Army Group A on the Black Sea sector. They were opposed by four Russian armies, Fortieth, Thirteenth, Twenty-First and Twenty-Eighth, lacking reserves because of Stalin's belief that the principal German threat lay against Moscow. Fortieth Army was destroyed in the first two days; the other three were forced back in confusion. The southern steppe – the treeless, roadless, almost unwatered 'sea of grass' which the Cossack horsemen had made their own in their escape from tsarist autocracy – offered the army no line of obstacles on which to organise a defence. Across it Kleist's and Hoth's armour swept forward. Alan Clark has described the advance:

> The progress of the German columns [was discernible] at thirty or forty miles' distance. An enormous dust cloud towered in the sky, thickened by smoke from

> burning villages and gunfire. Heavy and dark at the head of the column, the smoke lingered in the still atmosphere of summer long after the tanks had passed on, a hanging barrage of brown haze stretching back to the western horizon. War correspondents with the advance waxed lyrical about the ... 'Mot Pulk', or motorised square, which the columns represented on the move, with the trucks and artillery enclosed by a frame of Panzers.

However, the unexpected ease with which the Panzers had broken across the Donetz from Kharkov into the great grassland 'corridor' which stretched from that river a hundred miles eastward to the Don and led southward into the Caucasus now prompted Hitler to agree to a change of plan – disastrously, as it would turn out. Bock, worried that Army Group South might be attacked in flank as it proceeded down the Don–Donetz 'corridor', by Russian forces operating out of the interior towards the Don city of Voronezh, directed Hoth's Fourth Panzer Army to attack and capture the city. Paulus's Sixth Army was to be left to march down the corridor alone, unsupported by tanks, and then leap across from the 'great bend' of the Don to the Volga at Stalingrad, which it was to seize and hold as a blocking-point, to prevent further Russian attacks mounted from the interior against the flank of the main body when it passed by to penetrate the Caucasus.

Hitler, still directing the Russian campaign from Rastenburg, now separated by 700 miles from the vanguard of the *Ostheer*, became anxious that in fighting for Voronezh Bock might waste both time and tanks at a moment when time lacked and tanks were precious. Accordingly he flew to see the general on 3 July but was reassured by Bock's apparent promise that he would not embroil his striking force in close combat. By 7 July, however, it was clear that the promise would not be made good. Hoth's tanks had been drawn into the fighting for Voronezh instead of breaking off the battle to join Paulus's infantry in the march on Stalingrad, and looked to be engaged for some time to come. Peremptorily Hitler ordered them away, and on 13 July replaced Bock with Weichs as commander of Army Group South (now renamed B); but, as he would complain for months afterwards, the damage had been done. His generals' hopes of repeating the great captures of the previous year had been reawakened by the success at Kharkov in May. However, in the Donetz–Don corridor the Red Army, commanded by Timoshenko, had grown wilier. At the Stavka, A. M. Vasilevsky had succeeded in persuading Stalin that 'stand fast' orders issued for their own sake were undesirable, since they served the *Ostheer*'s ends, and in extracting permission for threatened Russian formations to slip away out of danger. So they did, assisted between 9 and 11 July by a temporary fuel crisis in Army Group B which halted Hoth's Panzers. Between 8 and 15 July, after three aborted encirclements between the Donetz and the Don, Army Groups A and B had captured only 90,000 prisoners – by the standards of the previous year a mere handful.

The heightening tension of crisis on the steppe front now prompted Hitler to leave Rastenburg for a headquarters nearer the centre of action. On 16 July OKW was trans-

The advance of Army Groups A and B to the Volga and the Caucasus, summer 1942. Russia's oil-bearing regions lie beyond the Caucasus crestline.

ported *en bloc* to Vinnitsa in the Ukraine, still 400 miles from the Don and isolated in a Rastenburg-like pine forest – malarial, as it turned out – but nevertheless handier for direct personal intervention by the Führer in the conduct of operations. From the Vinnitsa headquarters on 23 July he issued Führer Directive No. 45, codenamed 'Brunswick', for the continuation of 'Blue'. It directed the Seventeenth Army and the First Panzer Army of Army Group A to follow the Russians across the great bend of the Don and destroy them

beyond Rostov. Meanwhile the Sixth Army, supported by the Fourth Panzer Army, was to thrust forward to Stalingrad, 'to smash the enemy forces concentrated there, to occupy the town and to block land communications between the Don and Volga. . . . Closely connected with this, fast-moving forces will advance along the Volga with the task of thrusting through to Astrakhan.' Astrakhan lay in the far Caucasus, a land fabled even to Russians; to the *Landsers* tramping eastward, already 1000 miles from home in Silesia and 1500 miles from the Rhineland, it was a place almost at the end of the earth. Hitler's imagination leapt effortlessly at such objectives and he remembered that German soldiers had campaigned as far as that in 1918; but in 1942 a vast space and a still unsubdued Red Army interspersed between his infantry columns and the fulfilment of his dream of empire.

— 'Never contradict the Führer' —

List's advance southward with Army Group A at first went even faster and more smoothly than expected. Once across the Don, Kleist's tanks raced over the Kuban steppe to reach Maikop, where the first oil derricks were seen on 9 August. The oilfield was wrecked but the Luftwaffe commander, Wolfram von Richthofen, whose Fourth Air Fleet was supporting the operation, was certain he could drive the Russians out of the Caucasus passes and clear a way through to the main oilfields beyond. A breakthrough was also important to secure possession of Tuapse, the Black Sea port through which the enemy could be supplied from Bulgaria and Romania. On 21 August, Hitler was brought news that Bavarian mountain troops had raised the swastika flag on the peak of Mount Elbrus, the highest point in the Caucasus (and in Europe), but the achievement did not please him. He wanted more tank advances, not feats of mountaineering. As the tanks reached the foothills of the Caucasus, however, the advance began to slow and Hitler vented his impatience against those around him, first Halder, then Jodl. Halder was in disfavour for other reasons: subordinate operations near Moscow and at Leningrad also failed in August, and Halder's defence of soldiers consigned to carry out what he thought 'impossible orders' only inflamed Hitler's rage against what he called 'the last masonic lodge'.

Jodl, though no friend to Halder's OKH, shared its understanding of the difficulties faced by the troops on the ground. When the reports of two emissaries he had sent to the Caucasus front failed to soften the Führer's harshness towards List, Jodl himself went to visit Army Group A. He found the 4th Mountain Division stuck fast in a defile so narrow that it had no hope of breaking through to the Transcaucasus and its oil. The force advancing on Tuapse was equally blocked by Russian resistance and had no prospect of getting to the port before winter closed the passes. When he insisted to Hitler that List's predicament was insoluble and incautiously indicated that the Führer had contrived the impasse, the result was an outburst of fury. Hitler, acutely sensitive to any implied slur on his powers of command and obsessed by the danger of repeating mistakes made during the First World War, declared that Jodl was behaving like Hentsch, the General Staff officer

who had sanctioned the retreat from the Marne in 1914. He banished him and Keitel from his headquarters mess, installed stenographers in his command hut to take a verbatim record of his conferences so that his words could not be quoted against him, and dismissed List, assuming command of Army Group A himself on 9 September. He simultaneously sent the black spot to Halder, via Keitel, a man he chiefly valued for his widely remarked qualities of lackey and sycophant. On 23 September the army chief of staff left the Führer's presence in tears, to be replaced forthwith by General Kurt Zeitzler. 'Never contradict the Führer' was Keitel's advice to Zeitzler on the threshold of office. 'Never remind him that once he may have thought differently of something. Never tell him that subsequent events have proved you right and him wrong. Never report on casualties to him – you have to spare the nerves of the man.' Zeitzler owed his promotion mainly to his friendship with Schmundt, Hitler's chief adjutant, but he was also a dogged infantry soldier with an impressive fighting reputation. 'If a man starts a war,' he retorted to Keitel, 'he must have the nerve to bear the consequences.' During the twenty-two months when he served Hitler as army chief of staff, there were to be repeated passages of blunt speaking between them. After Halder, a 'swivel-chair' soldier, in Hitler's dismissive phrase, he brought a down-to-earth directness to the command conferences which Hitler found reassuring, and they were to rub along effectively even in the worst of crises.

Such a crisis was now in the making. Hitler's allusion to the Battle of the Marne was not without point. Then the German army had overextended itself and the high command had taken too little note of the danger levelled by a strongly garrisoned city on its flanks. Now on the Volga a similar danger loomed. Army Group A, reaching southward towards the Caucasus, maintained – with difficulty – lines of communication 300 miles long which it lacked the strength to protect against Russian forces located in the steppe to its east. Army Group B, which had earlier dawdled down the Donetz–Don corridor, was now being drawn into a battle around Stalingrad, and all the signs indicated that Stalin was transforming the city into a formidable centre of resistance. The parallel between 1914 and 1942 was not exact. At the Marne the German army had been beaten because it failed to find the force to capture Paris on its flank. The risk posed in 1942 was that Hitler would overreact and, by concentrating too much force at Stalingrad, deny his armies in the mountains and the open steppe the means to defend themselves against an enemy counter-stroke. Such was precisely the operational outcome towards which Stalin and the Stavka were now groping their way.

The first inkling of the plan for a Russian counter-stroke had been disclosed to Winston Churchill by Stalin when the British Prime Minister visited Moscow on 12–17 August. The moment was a low point in Anglo-Soviet relations. Although the obstacle presented by Russia's treatment of Poland had been partially removed – by Stalin's agreement the previous December to release his 180,000 Polish prisoners and transport them via Iran to form the 'Anders Army' under British command in Egypt – the Russians now had reason to reproach the British. After the massacre of convoy PQ17 in June, Britain

had decided to interrupt the convoying of Soviet supplies to the Arctic ports. More critically, in Washington in July, the opening of the 'Second Front' had been definitively postponed from 1942 to 1943. These reproaches Stalin threw in Churchill's teeth. He was also suspicious of Britain's offer to help defend the Caucasus, where the local Muslims had been supported by a British army in an effort to secede from Russia in 1918 and were even now displaying a favour towards the German invaders which had prompted Beria to send secret police troops to the region. On the eve of the leaders' parting, however, Stalin relented. Desperate for the sort of supplies only Western industry could provide – not weapons, which the Urals factories were beginning to produce in plenty (16,000 aircraft and 14,000 tanks in the second half of 1942), but trucks and finished aluminium – he confronted Churchill with his demands. To smooth the transition from accusation to supplication, he 'let the Prime Minister into the immensely secret prospect of a vast counter-offensive.'

The outline of the plan was still vague. It was not to be clearly defined until 13 September, by which time the Battle of Stalingrad had been raging for three weeks. According to Russian calculations, its inception was even earlier than that. On 24 July, Rostov-on-Don, the sentry-box of southern Russia, had fallen to the German Seventeenth Army. Its tank-heavy neighbours, the First and Fourth Panzer Armies, broke eastward across the Don in the next six days and, while the First wheeled south to drive to the Caucasus, the Fourth turned north-eastward to support Paulus's Sixth Army in the assault on Stalingrad. Resistance had been so slight that a sergeant of the 14th Panzer Division recorded that 'many of the soldiers were able to take off their clothes and bathe [in the Don] – as we had in the Dnieper exactly a year earlier'. By 19 August the Sixth Army was positioned to begin the attack on Stalingrad as Hitler's Fourth Panzer Army approached on a converging route. Stalingrad largely comprised a sprawl of wooden buildings surrounding modern factories in a strip twenty miles long on the west bank of the Volga, which was a mile wide at that point. Much of the city was destroyed in a day of bombing by the VIII Air Corps on 23 August. Through the smouldering ruins the Sixth Army pressed forward for the culminating advance to the Volga shore.

In the month that had elapsed since the crossing of the Don, however, Stalin and the Stavka had improvised at Stalingrad a defence as strong as they had found for Leningrad the previous autumn and for Moscow in December. All three cities had a symbolic importance for Hitler; Stalingrad had a particular significance for Stalin. Not only was it the largest of the many Russian cities to be given his name. It was also the place where in 1918 the 'southern clique' – Stalin, Voroshilov, Budenny and Timoshenko – had defied Trotsky over the conduct of the war against the Whites, the episode which launched his rise to power within the party. During August, accordingly, he rushed men and material to the Stalingrad front, created a ring of defences, appointed new and vigorous commanders and made it clear that his order of 28 July, read out to every Soviet soldier – 'Not a step backward!' – must apply most sternly of all there. 'Unitary command', which would once

A Soviet propaganda photograph of the defenders of Stalingrad during the autumn fighting of 1942. But the battlescape is authentic – central Stalingrad was reduced to rubble in the most bitter city fighting of the war.

again relegate commissars from an equal to an advisory status beside generals, was to be reintroduced on 9 October. Meanwhile he counted on his Stalingrad generals to resist retreat as if he himself stood at their elbows. V. N. Gordov and Yeremenko were the commanders of Stalingrad and South-Eastern Fronts respectively, V. I. Chuikov commanded the Sixty-Second Army in the city itself, and Zhukov was in overall charge of the theatre.

Zhukov's meeting with Stalin in the Kremlin on 13 September, however, concerned advance rather than retreat. In a dramatic leap of imagination he and Vasilevsky – now Chief of the General Staff, a post inherited from Zhukov on the latter's appointment as First Deputy Defence Commissar – outlined a plan for a wide encirclement of the German

forces on the lower Volga and the destruction of Paulus's Sixth Army in the city. Stalin's arguments for a narrow encirclement were dismissed; that would allow the Germans to break out and slip away. So too was his contention that the necessary force did not exist; in forty-five days it could be assembled and equipped. Stalin thereupon withdrew his objections, adding that the 'main business' was to ensure that Stalingrad did not fall.

It had come close to doing so. After the burning of the wooden quarters of the city on 23 August, the German Sixth Army had found itself drawn into a bitter battle for 'the jagged gullies of the Volga hills with their copses and ravines, into the factory area of Stalingrad, spread out over uneven, pitted rugged country, covered with iron, concrete and stone buildings', as one of Paulus's divisional commanders described it. For every house, workshop, water-tower, railway embankment, wall, cellar and every pile of ruins a bitter battle was waged, without equal even in the First World War.

By 13 September, the day after Paulus had returned from a conference with Hitler at Vinnitsa on the battle for the city, the Russian front line was still at least four and in some places ten miles from the Volga. It was held by three divisions of the Sixty-Second Army, which Chuikov had just been appointed to command, and the garrison deployed about sixty tanks. One of the divisional commanders, A. I. Rodimtsev, was experienced in street fighting, which he had learned with the International Brigade at Madrid in 1936. By contrast, Chuikov noted, 'on the pretext of illness three of my deputies had left for the opposite bank of the Volga.' Between 13 and 21 September the Germans, using three infantry divisions in one thrust and four infantry and Panzer divisions in another, drove down the banks of the Volga to surround the core of the defence – the Tractor, Barricades and Red October factories – and brought artillery fire to bear on the central landing stage to which men and supplies were ferried nightly from the east bank.

However, the struggle had exhausted the vanguard of the Sixth Army, and a pause intervened while fresh troops were assembled for the street battle. It began again on 4 October. Chuikov was no longer defending above ground. His strongpoints had become subterranean and his headquarters troglodyte, its staff officers and specialists inhabiting tunnels and bunkers dug into the western bank of the Tsaritsa river near the Volga landing stage. Only the strongest buildings survived, to be fought over for a fractional advantage of dominance that each conferred. An officer of the 24th Panzer Division during the October battle wrote:

> We have fought for fifteen days for a single house with mortars, grenades, machine-guns and bayonets. Already by the third day fifty-four German corpses are strewn in the cellars, on the landings, and the staircases. The front is a corridor between burnt-out rooms; it is the thin ceiling between two floors. Help comes from neighbouring houses by fire-escapes and chimneys. There is a ceaseless struggle from noon to night. From storey to storey, faces black with sweat, we bombed each other with grenades in the middle of explosions, clouds of dust and smoke. . . . Ask any soldier

> what hand-to-hand struggle means in such a fight. And imagine Stalingrad; eighty days and eighty nights of hand-to-hand struggle. . . . Stalingrad is no longer a town. By day it is an enormous cloud of burning, blinding smoke; it is a vast furnace lit by the reflection of the flames. And when night arrives, one of those scorching, howling, bleeding nights, the dogs plunge into the Volga and swim desperately to gain the other bank. The nights of Stalingrad are a terror for them. Animals flee this hell; the hardest storms cannot bear it for long; only men endure.

The Nietzschean–Nazi rhetoric apart, this is not an exaggerated picture of the Stalingrad battle. Chuikov, no sensationalist and a cool-headed newcomer to the war – he had previously been Russian military attaché in China – describes a succeeding stage.

> On 14 October the Germans struck out; that day will go down as the bloodiest and most ferocious of the whole battle. Along a narrow front of four or five kilometres, the Germans threw in five infantry divisions and two tank divisions supported by masses of artillery and planes . . . during the day there were over two thousand Luftwaffe sorties. That morning you could not hear the separate shots or explosions, the whole merged into one continuous deafening roar. At five yards you could no longer distinguish anything, so thick were the dust and the smoke. . . . That day sixty-one men in my headquarters were killed. After four or five hours of this stunning barrage, the Germans started to attack with tanks and infantry, and they advanced one and a half kilometres and finally broke through to the Tractor Plant.

This lunge marked the penultimate stage of the German advance. On 18 October a lull fell over the city. 'From then on', noted Chuikov, 'the two armies were left gripping each other in a deadly clutch; the front became virtually stabilised.' In some places it was less than 300 yards from the Volga. The Red October Factory had been lost to the Germans, the Tractor and Barricades factories were only partly in Russian hands, and Chuikov's front was split into two pockets. But the garrisons, inspired by his famous slogan to fight as if 'there is no land across the Volga', held on, the wounded (35,000 in all) being ferried back each night in the boats that brought replacements (65,000 men) and ammunition (24,000 tons) from the far shore. The Germans of the Sixth Army, though supplied and reinforced more easily, were as much gripped by exhaustion as their enemies. Richthofen, the local Luftwaffe commander, noted in a November entry in his diary: 'The commanders and combat troops at Stalingrad are so apathetic that only the injection of a new spirit will get us anywhere.' But no new spirit was forthcoming. Hitler appeared to have forgotten whatever reason he had ever had for committing the Sixth Army to the battle for the city.

Overleaf: *A German mortar crew prepares to advance at Stalingrad. The soldier in the centre carries the base-plate and the soldier on the left a rack of bombs.*

Its waging had come to overshadow the strategy of capturing the Caucasus or even the consolidation of the 'steppe front' north of the city, along the line of the Don, against a Russian counter-attack. Hitler's dangerous tendency to obsess himself at his twice-daily command conferences with yards instead of miles and platoons instead of armies had robbed his direction of the struggle of all perspective. If his soldiers now succeeded in pushing Chuikov and the remnants of the Sixty-Second Army over the Stalingrad cliffs and into the Volga, at best he would have achieved a local success at catastrophic cost; the twenty divisions of the Sixth Army had already lost half their fighting strength. If they failed, the *Ostheer*'s largest offensive concentration would have been devastated for no result and the initiative given to the Red Army.

Paulus mounted a final effort on 11 November, in weather that already heralded the cold which would freeze the Volga and restore Chuikov's solid passage to the far shore. Next day a thrust by the Fourth Panzer Army succeeded in reaching the Volga south of the city, thus encircling it completely. That was the last success the Germans were to achieve at this easternmost point of their advance into Russia. For six days local and small-scale battles flickered on, killing soldiers on both sides but gaining ground for neither. Then, on 19 November, in Alan Clark's words 'a new and terrible sound overlaid' the rattle of small arms – 'the thunderous barrage of Voronov's two thousand guns to the north'. The Stalin–Zhukov–Vasilevsky counter-stroke had begun.

— The fragile shell —

In order to concentrate the largest possible German force against Stalingrad itself, Hitler had economised elsewhere by lining the Don over the steppe front north and south of the city with his satellite troops, Romanians, Hungarians and Italians. The kernel of his Stalingrad concentration, in short, was German; the shell was not. All autumn Hitler had blinded himself to this weakness in the *Ostheer*'s deployment. Now the Russians detected that, by breaking the fragile shell, they would surround and overcome the Sixth Army without having to fight it directly. It was about to suffer an encirclement by which Stalin would gain partial revenge on Hitler for those at Minsk, Smolensk and Kiev which had nearly destroyed the Red Army the previous year.

Zhukov's plan disposed two fronts, South-West (Vatutin) and Don (Rokossovsky), west of the city with five infantry and two tank armies, and the Stalingrad Front (Yeremenko) to the south with one tank and three infantry armies. The South-West and Don Fronts struck on 19 November, the Stalingrad Front the following day. By 23 November their pincers had met at Kalach on the Don west of Stalingrad. The Third and Fourth Romanian Armies had been devastated, the Fourth (German) Panzer Army was in full retreat, and the Sixth Army was entombed in the ruins on the banks of the Volga.

The inception of Operation Uranus (as the Russians codenamed their counter-offensive) found Hitler at his house at Berchtesgaden, in retreat from the strains of fighting