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STALIN'S STRATEGIC DILEMMA

Hitler's decision to commit Germany's last army to a winter offensive in the west in 1944, rather than to use it as a counter-attack force against the encroachments of the Red Army in the east, might seem with hindsight one of the most perverse of the Second World War. In the east, Germany was defended by neither geography nor man-made fortifications. In the west, both the Siegfried Line (West Wall) and the Rhine stood between the Anglo-American armies and the interior of Germany. Comparatively weak forces committed to hold those obstacles would have sufficed to hold Eisenhower's troops at bay for months, while the Sixth SS and Fifth Panzer Armies, under which Hitler's last tank reserve was concentrated, might have won an equal amount of time had they been deployed to fight on the line of the Vistula and the Carpathians instead of being cast away in the Ardennes adventure. Hitler's rationalisation of his decision is well known: in the west the Allied armies were exposed to a counterstroke towards Antwerp, the success of which would have freed his forces to unleash in the east a subsequent offensive designed to destabilise the Red Army. In short, he chose to strike for the chance of victory rather than settle for postponing the onset of defeat. Events were to rob him of both outcomes. The choice of the Ardennes offensive, though it may have set back a little the launching of the Rhine crossing, actually thereby ensured the unimpeded advance of the Red Army's offensive in the east whenever Stalin chose to launch it.

Previous page: *Russian firepower in the Kursk cauldron, July 1943, the decisive battle of the war on the Eastern Front.*

Yet it remains generally unperceived that Hitler's plunge into double jeopardy was determined by his confrontation with not a double but a triple threat. In the west he faced the danger of an Allied assault on the Rhine. In the east the Red Army menaced the Greater Reich on two large and widely separated fronts: from Poland through Silesia towards Berlin; and also from eastern Hungary towards Budapest, Vienna and Prague. Since Hitler had no means of knowing on which of these two axes Stalin would make his major effort, strategic sense positively argued for disposing of the danger in the west first and then transferring his striking force eastward – always supposing it had survived the shock of battle – to oppose the Red Army on whichever sector, north or south of the Carpathians, that it appeared in greater strength. The ultimate validation of this judgement, though Hitler could only guess at it, was that until November 1944 Stalin himself had been in two minds about whether to strike directly for Berlin or to distract and destroy the fighting power of the *Ostheer* by a thrust elsewhere, the Budapest–Vienna axis being the most obvious choice.

Since the moment when the Red Army had been able to go over to the offensive at Stalingrad in 1942, the sheer size of the Eastern Front, the ratio of force to space, the erratic flow of supplies and the paucity of road and rail communications had time and again forced Stalin into a similar choice between fronts. Even the German army, during the summer months of Barbarossa in 1941, had been obliged to close down Army Group Centre's front for six weeks while Army Groups North and South made up ground to come abreast of it on the roads to Leningrad and Kiev. Those were armies at the height of their powers, led by commanders flushed with victory, spearheaded by superbly efficient armoured forces and backed by still ample reserves of manpower. The Red Army which went over to the offensive for the first time at Stalingrad, by contrast, had been ravaged by eighteen months of losses on a scale never experienced before in history, was led by generals whose self-confidence had been shaken by a succession of disasters and was fed from a pool of recruits in which the very young and the over-mature were now disproportionately represented. It was an army which had yet to learn how to manoeuvre; until it did so, its operations were perforce limited to responding to German thrusts and to taking up ground by frontal advance on the sectors where the Germans had weakened themselves by over-extension.

The deficiencies of the Red Army, moreover, permeated the Soviet military structure from the bottom to the top. Stalin himself was an uncertain military leader, surrounded by civilian and military subordinates who lacked the experience of directing armed forces under the strain of war, and served by a command structure he had to improvise from scratch. Because of the nature of the Soviet system and of his own devious character, moreover, Stalin could not mobilise and focus upon himself the popular support which so strengthened Churchill's hand, for example, in rallying the nation to cope with crisis. The peoples of the Soviet Union did not form a nation, the experience of industrialisation and collectivisation had alienated millions from the rule of the Communist Party, the party was

further tainted by its exclusive and repressive methods of government, while Stalin himself commanded it by the use of selective terror against his comrades which was made all the more distasteful by his maintenance of the fiction that he was no more than first among equals in a collective leadership.

The spirit of patriotism could to some extent be artificially revived. The epics of Russian history could be recalled, Russian heroes of the past – Ivan the Terrible, Alexander Nevsky, Peter the Great – could be rehabilitated, decorations and orders which commemorated victorious generals of the imperial era (Kutuzov and Suvorov) could be created, distinctions of rank and dress, abolished at the Revolution, could be revived. The Orthodox Church, an object of contempt in a professedly atheist state, could even be enlisted to preach the crusade of the Great Patriotic War; its reward, in September 1943, was to be allowed to elect its first synod since the institution was suppressed after the Revolution. These, however, were mere expedients. They were no substitute for an effective organ of strategic command, which Stalin must provide or else fail as a war leader, consigning Russia to defeat and himself to extinction.

Stalin does indeed seem to have come close to breakdown in the first weeks of Barbarossa. 'For a week', describes Professor John Erickson,

it was all the anonymity of 'the Soviet government', the 'Central Committee' and 'Sovnarkom', the clamour of organisation, and the rattle of Party exhortations. . . . Stalin, committed irrevocably to war in spite of himself, 'locked himself in his quarters' for three days at least after the first, catastrophic week-end. When he emerged, he was, according to an officer who saw him at first hand, 'low in spirit and nervy'. . . . [He] put in no more than rare appearances at the Stavka in these early days; the main military administration was, for all practical purposes, seriously disorganised and the General Staff, with its specialists dispatched to the front commands, functioned with tantalisingly persistent slowness. . . . The Stavka discussions ground into an operational-administrative bog; while trying to formulate strategic-operational assignments, Stalin and his officers busied themselves with minutiae which devoured valuable time – the type of rifle to be issued to infantry units (standard or cavalry models), or whether bayonets were needed, and if so should they be triple-edged?

In fairness it must be said that Hitler also took refuge in the discussion of military minutiae as an escape from the pressure of crisis and often, if the crisis protracted, refused to discuss anything else, as the surviving fragments of his Stalingrad Führer conference records reveal. Stalin, by contrast, returned quickly to realities. On 3 July 1941, the eleventh day of the war, he broadcast to the Soviet people – an almost unprecedented event – and addressed the 'comrades, citizens, brothers and sisters' as his 'friends'. Moreover, he moved at once to put the government of the Soviet Union on a war footing. The way in which he did so is

almost incomprehensible to Westerners, attuned as they are to a strict separation between organs of state and political parties, civil power and military authority, bureaucrats and commanders. In peacetime the Soviet system blurred such distinctions; Stalin heightened this ambiguity in the structure he erected for war. His first move, on 30 June, was to create a State Defence Committee to oversee the political, economic and military aspects of the war; its membership, later slightly broadened, consisted of himself, Molotov, the Foreign Minister, Voroshilov, who had been Commissar for Defence from 1925 to 1940, Malenkov, his right-hand man in the party organisation, and – significantly – Beria, head of the secret police (NKVD). On 19 July he nominated himself as People's Commissar for Defence and on 8 August secretly assumed the post of Supreme Commander; as Supreme Commander (though he continued to be identified only as Commissar for Defence) he controlled the V Staff, in effect the executive organ of the State Defence Committee (GKO), which oversaw both the General Staff and the operational commands or fronts. As the acts and decisions of the GKO automatically carried the authority of the council of People's Commissars, of which Stalin was head, and as he could also detach officers of the General Staff, notably and most frequently Zhukov and Vasilevsky, to run fronts or direct specified operations, Stalin dominated the direction of the Great Patriotic War from top to bottom (the designation 'patriotic' had been used in his broadcast of 3 July). Though he cautiously disguised from the Soviet people his ultimate responsibility for command decision, and would emerge as Marshal, Generalissimo and 'the great Stalin' only when a roll of substantial victories had been secured, Stalin was effectively commander-in-chief from the beginning of July 1941 onwards. He was implacable in that role. When Army Group Centre resumed its advance on Moscow in October, his confidence was shaken almost as severely as it had been in June, but he never relaxed the grip of fear in which he held his subordinates: dismissal, disgrace, even execution were the penalties which awaited failures. General Ismay, Churchill's military assistant who visited Moscow in October, noted the effect: 'as [Stalin] entered the room every Russian froze into silence and the hunted look in the eyes of the generals showed all too plainly the constant fear in which they lived. It was nauseating to see brave men reduced to such servility.'

A few held out. Zhukov was notably robust, appearing not to be frightened by Mekhlis, the chief political commissar used by Stalin to bring others down. Zhukov had the advantage of having successfully commanded tanks against the Japanese in a brief and undeclared Russo-Japanese border war in Mongolia in 1939; more important, he was naturally tough, able to accept dismissal by Stalin from the post of Chief of the General Staff and to proceed to an operational command without diminished confidence in his own abilities, which he knew Stalin recognised. Others of Zhukov's stamp were to appear, notably Rokossovsky and Konev. By the time all three were commanding fronts in 1944, Stalin's difficulties in finding able subordinates were largely solved.

In the meantime, however, he had to do most of the work of directing the Great Patriotic War and running the Red Army himself; to a greater extent than was true of the

high command of any other of the combatant powers, Stalin dominated Russia's war effort. Hitler and his generals coexisted in a constant state of tension. Churchill imposed his will by argument, which prevailed less and less as the Americans took over an ever greater share of the fighting. Roosevelt largely presided over rather than directed his chiefs of staff. Stalin, however, dictated. All information flowed to him, wherever he was to be found during the day or night, whether in the Kremlin, at his country dacha at Kuntsevo or, while German bombs threatened Moscow, in an improvised headquarters on a platform of the Moscow underground railway; from him all orders flowed back. He held a situation conference three times a day, in a routine curiously similar to Hitler's, hearing reports first at noon, then at four in the afternoon, and finally dictating orders directly to officers of the General Staff but in the presence of the Politburo between midnight and three or four in the morning.

Vasilevsky, in effect Stalin's operations officer, playing a role equivalent to that of Jodl in Hitler's headquarters, perceptively observed and later recorded the dictator's methods of command. He noted that Stalin established his dominance over the military in the first year of the war, that is to say far more quickly than Hitler did over the Wehrmacht, perhaps because of his previous experience of operations as commissar of the First Cavalry Army during the Civil War. In the early months he took his confidence too far: in 1941 he was almost wholly responsible for the disaster at Kiev, having refused permission for withdrawal until it was too late for the defenders to escape encirclement; in 1942 he dismissed the danger of a renewed German offensive into southern Russia and committed Timoshenko's fronts to the Kharkov counter-offensive, an altogether premature seizure of the initiative which resulted in over 200,000 Russians being taken prisoner – almost a repetition of the encirclements of the year before. Thereafter he was more cautious. It was eventually Zhukov and Vasilevsky who proposed the double envelopment at Stalingrad; they outlined the concept to Stalin in his office on 13 September 1942 and he accepted it only after they had reasoned away his cautious objections.

Zhukov's highly retrospective assessment of Stalin's worth as a commander was that he excelled above all as a military economist who knew how to collect reserves even while the front was consuming manpower in gargantuan mouthfuls. Certainly his achievement both at Stalingrad and in the two years that followed was to have such reserves at hand – he estimated to the British a consistent surplus over the Germans of some sixty divisions, probably an overestimate – whenever the *Ostheer* gave him the opportunity to profit by a strategic mistake. He deployed such a reserve in a counter-attack when the Germans had exhausted themselves in the offensive phase of the Kursk operation in July 1943. He sustained the success at Kursk by using his reserve in August to recapture Kharkov, the most fought-over city in the Soviet Union. By October his autumn offensive, fuelled by the units he held in reserve, had retaken all the most valuable territory won by the *Ostheer* during its advance into Russia in the two previous years – an enormous tract 650 miles in breadth from north to south, 150 miles in depth, beyond which only the Dnieper, the last truly

substantial military obstacle on the steppe, lay to oppose the Red Army's advance. By the end of November the Red Army had secured three enormous bridgeheads on the European side of the Dnieper, had cut the Crimea off from contact with the *Ostheer* and stood poised to open its advance into Poland and Romania.

Ironically, victory brought Stalin a dilemma. Until Stalingrad he had been staving off defeat; until Kursk he still faced the risk of a disabling German initiative; until the advance to the Dnieper he fed, supplied and manned the Red Army by wartime improvisation. Thereafter he knew, like Churchill, that he 'had won after all'. Germany's armoured *masse de manoeuvre* no longer existed, while he had regained possession of his country's most productive agricultural and industrial regions. Moreover, he could now count upon shifting much of the burden of destroying the Wehrmacht from the Red Army to the Allies. At Tehran on November 1943, Brooke, Churchill's chief of staff, noted that in his quick and unerring appreciation of opportunity and situation he 'stood out compared to Churchill and Roosevelt'. By one of the most brutal contrivances of public embarrassment recorded in diplomatic history, he shamed Churchill into conceding his total commitment to Overlord and to agreeing to name both a commander and a date. Thereafter he could be certain that from mid-1944 Hitler would be caught between two fires, and he could let that in the west blaze while he chose where he could most profitably apply the heat elsewhere. As events turned out, he chose to attack on his northern front, destroying Army Group Centre and driving the Germans back to the Vistula. However, that decision did not commit his hand. He still retained the option of either (like the Western Allies) committing all his strength to a final throw designed to destroy the Wehrmacht in a final battle for eastern Germany and Berlin, or diverting a major part of the Red Army's force into southern Europe, there to build a Soviet equivalent of Hitler's Tripartite Pact and so assure the Soviet Union against invasion for decades to come.

It was a tantalising choice. Stalin had not chosen to enter the Second World War; but he had chosen, even before it began, to profit from the tensions that brought it about. In the twenty-one months during which the war had raged while he stood on the sidelines, he had greatly profited from its unfolding. From his alliance with Hitler he had gained in turn eastern Poland, then – through the freedom the non-aggression pact had allowed him to attack Finland – eastern Karelia, then the Baltic states, finally Romanian Bessarabia and northern Bukovina. Barbarossa had engulfed his country in the worst of the fighting brought on by the Second World War. By the summer of 1944, however, he could begin to consider again how best the Soviet Union might profit geopolitically from the war's concluding stage. Stalin, even more than Hitler, was committed to a view of war as a political event. Between Barbarossa and Kursk the 'correlation of forces' had worked against him. Thereafter they began to operate to his advantage. Even as Hitler was laying the groundwork for his last offensive in the west, Stalin was considering where he might best seize the opportunities presented by the collapse of Hitler's strategy in the east.

THE RUSSIAN WINTER OFFENSIVE, JANUARY-MARCH 1943

On 12 January 1943, even before Paulus had surrendered in Stalingrad, the Red Army launched a massive counter-attack to wrest back the territories lost in the summer of 1942. The Russians attacked on four fronts between Orel and Rostov with the aim of recovering Kharkov and cutting off the German withdrawal from the Caucasus. Soviet forces had recaptured Kursk by 8 February, and by 16 February they had recovered Kharkov. However, by the third week in February they had created a salient south-west of Kharkov, against which Manstein's Army Group South launched a determined counter-blow on 20 February, taking the Russians by surprise. Within a week Manstein's Panzer spearheads had fought their way back to the Donetz. Having trapped and destroyed the Soviet Third Tank Army, Manstein massed four Panzer corps south-west of Kharkov on 3 March for a drive against the Voronezh Front. Punching through the Voronezh Front, Manstein had reached Kharkov by the 12th, which was retaken three days later after bitter street fighting. On the 18th the Germans retook Belgorod. The Red Army was driven back to the east bank of the Donetz, but the onset of the spring thaw prevented Manstein from implementing the third phase of his plan, the reduction of the huge Soviet salient based on Kursk and held by the Central and Voronezh Fronts. Manstein's brilliant counter-stroke had done much to restore the German position and had given the Red Army a salutary lesson in the dangers of underestimating the fighting qualities of the German army. However, to the south Kleist's Army Group A was trapped in the Taman peninsula. Only First Panzer Army escaped to safety through the corridor which Manstein had striven to keep open to Rostov, which fell to the Red Army on 14 February.





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KURSK AND THE
RECAPTURE OF
WESTERN RUSSIA

The disastrous Stalingrad campaign of 1942-3 left Hitler a debilitated and shaken man. Guderian, visiting him at his Ukrainian headquarters on 21 February 1943 on his unexpected reappointment to command as Chief of Panzer Troops, found him greatly changed since their last meeting in December 1941: 'His left hand trembled, his back was bent, his gaze was fixed, his eyes protruded but lacked their former lustre, his cheeks were flecked with red. He was more excitable, easily lost his composure and was prone to angry outbursts and ill-considered decisions.'

His will to make decisions had also been weakened. In the year between the onset of the Battle of Moscow and the Russian encirclement and destruction of the Sixth Army at Stalingrad Hitler had exercised the *Führerprinzip* at its fullest. He had peremptorily dismissed generals who failed or displeased him and held the rest of the *Generalität* strictly obedient to his orders. Apart from the failure to advance boldly southward from Voronezh in July – and Bock had been sacked for that – his generals had done his will to the letter; that was precisely the problem. The triumphs of the 1942 campaign belonged exclusively to Hitler, but so too did the disasters, both the over-extension into the Caucasus and the defeat of Stalingrad. The consequent loss of twenty of the *Ostheer's* divisions lay on his conscience, so that even two years afterwards he would confess to one of his doctors that his sleepless nights were filled with visions of the situation map marked with the positions occupied by the German divisions at the moment they were destroyed. The unspoken reproaches of his military intimates – Jodl and Keitel – were hard enough to bear; his self-recrimination was still more painful.

During the spring of 1943, therefore, in planning the *Ostheer's* strategy Hitler conceded a freedom of action to his subordinates they had not known since his first exercises in command in 1940 and were certainly never to know again – although in other areas of policy he continued to make demands. Believing that Rommel lacked both 'optimism' and 'staying power,' he intervened heavily in the conduct of the battle against the Anglo-American armies in North Africa in the spring of 1943, releasing precious armoured units from his central reserve and requiring Goering to transfer air squadrons from Sicily to Tunisian airfields. He meanwhile hectored Goering's subordinates about the worsening of the air war over Germany – Allied 'round the clock' bombing began on 25 February and heavy British or American raids on Berlin, Nuremberg, Essen, Bremen, Kiel and the Möhne–Eder dams followed in the next weeks. He demanded and got a measure of retaliation against Britain, commissioned Guderian to multiply German tank production and approved Goebbels's programme for the promulgation of 'total war', outlined to him at a meeting with the Nazi Party's Gauleiters at Rastenburg on 7 February. However, in the immediate direction of operations on the Eastern Front, his principal theatre of war-making, during the first half of 1943 he took a curiously tentative and indecisive part.

This was not to prove wholly to the *Ostheer's* disadvantage. In Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, commander of Army Group South, it had a battlefield commander of the highest quality, acutely sensitive to the tactical opportunities offered by the Red Army's lumbering style of manoeuvre, yet strongly resistant to the psychological intimidation by which Hitler overcame the intellectual independence of his lesser generals. During February, however, in the aftermath of the Stalingrad surrender and his own aborted attempt to relieve Paulus's Sixth Army, Manstein was discountenanced by an unexpectedly successful Soviet attack on the key city of Kharkov, west of the Don.

The Red Army's victory at Stalingrad, and the subsequent disorder caused to the whole of the German southern front, had presented the Stavka for the first time with the prospect of seizing the initiative and throwing the *Ostheer* clean out of the Ukraine, Germany's most valuable territorial acquisition in the Soviet Union. By the end of January a plan had been conceived for the Southern and South-West Fronts to advance as far as the line of the Dnieper, the third great river line beyond the Don and Donetz, by the spring thaw. Thereafter their neighbouring fronts would advance and swing north-westward to unseat Army Group Centre from the northern Ukraine and roll it back to Smolensk. The first and crucial move in the great offensive would be played by a Front Mobile Group, commanded by General M. M. Popov and consisting of four tank corps, which was to attack in the vanguard of Vatutin's South-West Front and drive on Kharkov.

The Stavka plan was superficially well judged, for the Russian victory at Stalingrad had created three crises for the Germans. The Red Army's advance from Stalingrad had thrown Manstein's Army Group Don (renamed South on 12 February) back on to Rostov, the 'gateway' of the southern front. The enforced withdrawal of Kleist's Army Group A from the Caucasus had carried it to the shore of the Sea of Azov, leaving a gap a hundred miles



Field Marshal Erich von Manstein (right) studies the map. He is generally regarded as the most accomplished of Hitler's field generals.

wide between his front and Manstein's. Moreover, the continuation of Vatutin's attack on the Hungarians defending Voronezh, north-west of Stalingrad, threatened after 14 January to detach Manstein's northern flank from contact with Kluge's Army Group B (Centre after 12 February). The opening stages of the Stavka's offensive augured well for its success. Between 2 and 5 February Russian pressure on the lower Don was so intense that Hitler, at Manstein's insistence, was forced to agree to the abandonment of Rostov, while a simultaneous advance from Voronezh on the upper Don brought Vatutin's South-West Front to Kharkov on 14 February. A bitter battle for the city erupted, in which the population took part, and, despite the efforts of the elite I SS Panzer Corps (*Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler* and *Das Reich* divisions), the Germans were defeated and forced to abandon it on 16 February. As a result a gap nearly 200 miles wide yawned between Army Groups South and Centre.

The Stavka had, however, made two fatal miscalculations. One was to overestimate the Red Army's capabilities. The other was to underestimate Manstein. 'Both the Voronezh and South-West Fronts', comments Professor John Erickson, the leading Western historian of the Great Patriotic War, 'had done some prodigious fighting and covered great stretches

of ground, following nothing less than a trail of destruction as retreating German units blew up bridges, buildings and airfields, tangled railway lines and damaged the few roads as much as possible.' However, by mid-February the Popov spearhead, which had begun the offensive with only 137 tanks (no more than a single German Panzer division normally fielded), could put only fifty-three into action, while the so-called Third Tank Army of the Voronezh Front could find only six.

Vatutin's decision on 12 February to 'broaden' the offensive, in accordance with the Stavka's general directive, would therefore have been incautious even against a normally competent opposing commander who retained a modicum of tank reserves. Against Manstein – a supreme master of what both the German and the Russian armies called the 'operational' level of command – the broadening of the offensive was foolhardy. Even before the height of the crisis had been reached, Hitler had ordered seven divisions from France to his front, where he himself arrived to confer with Manstein on 17 February. The pretext was to oversee the unleashing of a counterstroke by Army Group South and to rally the *Ostheer* to the concept of 'total war', which Goebbels proclaimed to the German people in an inflammatory speech at the Berlin Sports Palace the next day. 'The outcome of a crucial battle depends on you,' Hitler wrote in an order of the day. 'A thousand miles from the Reich's frontiers the fate of Germany's present and future is in the balance. . . . The entire German homeland has been mobilised. . . . Our youth are manning the anti-aircraft defences around Germany's cities and workplaces. More and more divisions are on their way. Weapons unique and hitherto unknown are on the way to your front. . . . That is why I have flown to you, to exhaust every means of alleviating your defensive battle and to convert it into ultimate victory.' In reality the counterstroke was not Hitler's conception but Manstein's. Not only had he extracted permission to launch it from Hitler during an urgent visit to Rastenburg on 6 February. He had also found the necessary armoured striking force – of a strength to make Popov's look insignificant – by concentrating all available Panzer reserves under his reconstituted Fourth Panzer Army and positioning it alongside the First Panzer Army, in the neck of ground between the Donetz and the Dnieper across which Vatutin's South-West Front was seeking to break its way into the German rear.

So dangerous was Vatutin's manoeuvre, threatening as it did to cut off Army Group A in its bridgehead on the Asiatic shore of the Sea of Azov, that Hitler had actually granted permission for troops to be airlifted from it to join Manstein. Over 100,000 were to be sent in that way; but before they or any of the divisions alerted in the west arrived Manstein had struck. On 20 February his two Panzer armies mounted convergent attacks on the flanks of Popov's Front Mobile Group, still advancing to the crossings over the Dnieper less than fifty miles away. The Russian higher command failed altogether to grasp the gravity of the changed situation. It urged Popov onward and on 21 February the General Staff even ordered Malinovsky's Southern Front on Vatutin's flank to join more actively in the offensive: 'Vatutin's troops are speeding on at an extraordinary pace . . . the hold-up on his

left is due to the absence of active operations on the part of your front.' In fact Popov was already threatened with encirclement, had begun to run out of fuel and was stopped in his tracks. By 24 February, when despite reinforcements he had only fifty tanks left, over 400 German tanks were operating against his left flank alone. By 28 February, when German tanks reached the banks of the Donetz, his group and much of the rest of Vatutin's South-West Front were surrounded, and such units as escaped did so only because the river was still frozen.

— Manstein renews the offensive —

The collapse of Popov's offensive now allowed Manstein to unleash the second phase of his plan, for the recapture of Kharkov. The Fourth Panzer Army had now begun to receive the reinforcements sent from the west, including the SS Totenkopf Division (originally formed from concentration camp guards) which went to join *Leibstandarte* and *Das Reich* in I SS Panzer Corps. Their loss of Kharkov the previous month rankled savagely with these ideological warriors who, in formidable strength, opened their attack to retake the city on 7 March. By 10 March the northern suburbs were the scene of savage fighting, and two days later the city was effectively surrounded, together with numbers of Soviet units struggling to sustain the defence. Now the Germans threatened the Red Army's centre with envelopment at exactly the spot from which they had hoped to begin the encirclement of Hitler's. So dangerous did the situation suddenly appear to the Stavka that rather than send reinforcements to help their beleaguered formations at Kharkov they rushed them instead to the neighbouring Voronezh Front, south of Kursk, where they succeeded in holding a sector which was to become the southern face of what would soon be called the Kursk salient. With the commitment of these troops to the defensive rather than the offensive, the Soviet spring offensive of 1943 could be seen to have failed, like that which followed victory in the Battle of Moscow the year before. Some Russians had already foreseen that outcome. As Golikov, the commander of the Voronezh Front, had signalled to a subordinate at the height of the Red Army's effort: 'There are 200–230 miles to the Dnieper and to the spring *rasputitsa* there are 30–35 days. Draw your own conclusions.'

The *rasputitsa*, the twice-yearly wet season caused by the autumn rains and the spring thaw, which turns the dirt roads to quagmires and the surrounding steppe to swamp, had worked to Germany's disadvantage in 1941 and 1942, delaying the advance on Moscow, into the Ukraine and on Stalingrad. Now it brought a welcome breathing space. With all the *Ostheer's* reserves concentrated in the south, the Red Army was able to reopen a land route to Leningrad and to move against the force isolated since the Battle of Moscow in

Mud, armour and endless spaces, three constant factors in the spring and autumn campaigns fought on the Eastern Front. A German Stug III self-propelled gun negotiates the mire.



the northern Demyansk pocket – though not to prevent its escape. It was also able to sustain sufficient pressure on the Vyazma salient west of Moscow to persuade Hitler to sanction an uncharacteristic withdrawal to a short front, prepared in advance and called the 'Buffalo Line'. However, while the wet season lasted, and despite the immense losses it had inflicted on the enemy – 185,000 among the Italians, 140,000 among the Hungarians, 250,000 among the Romanians and, by the Wehrmacht's own reckoning, nearly half a million among the Germans – it could not find the strength to resume the offensive on any major sector.

— Operation Citadel —

Despite the hair's breadth by which the *Ostheer* had escaped disaster on the southern front during the Stalingrad winter, Hitler and his generals were nevertheless turning to a resumption of the offensive at precisely the moment that the Red Army was admitting defeat. 'The real struggle is only beginning', Stalin warned in his message to his soldiers on Red Army Day, 23 February 1943. He and the Stavka knew that it had exhausted its current strength, and that until the awaited donations of Lend-Lease aid and output from the relocated Urals factories had been received, until the next inflow of young conscripts and older 'comb-outs' had been trained, Russia could not form the 'reserve of force which would safely allow her generals to go over to the attack. The German calculation was precisely contrary. Because the *rasputitsa* and the Red Army's exhaustion had granted the *Ostheer* a breathing space, it must attack as soon as possible, or suffer the consequences of inactivity.

The question was: where? It was an issue which, for the last time during the war, the generals were largely to settle between themselves. Hitler's confidence, his sense of personal credibility in the eyes of his commanders, had been so shaken by the outcome of his insistence on holding Stalingrad as a 'fortress' that he had temporarily lost the will to dictate strategic terms to his subordinates. During his visit to Manstein's headquarters on 17–19 February, before the Kharkov counterstroke, he had listened to a review of the opportunities which might flow from its success. The discussion between Kleist (Army Group A), Jodl, Zeitzler, the new army chief of staff, and Manstein was far more free-ranging than any he permitted on home territory at Rastenburg. Towards the end of the three-day meeting, conducted at times to the sound of Russian gunfire, he had intervened decisively to quash a typically bold proposition by Manstein for a 'one step backward, two steps forward' manoeuvre north of the Crimea, since it entailed the temporary surrender of ground, something to which he was temperamentally opposed. The alternative proposition, for a concentric attack on the developing salient of Kursk, he did not reject but left to Zeitzler and the generals of the *Ostheer* to put into executive form.

During the lull imposed by the *rasputitsa* in March and April, the longest the soldiers of both sides on the Eastern Front were to enjoy throughout the war, the staffs of both the

German and the Red armies busied themselves with detailed planning for the great battle which summer must bring, while their overlords, in an uncanny convergence of mutual doubt, sought to modify their proposals, even to temporise with the inevitability of action. Stalin seemed unable to follow the logic of his generals' strategic analysis, believing that the whole Soviet front was threatened but particularly the sector opposite Moscow, and argued for using available strength in a 'spoiling' attack which would at least ensure that the Germans did not win a third summer victory in 1943. In a meeting with his senior commanders on 12 April he agreed that the construction of deep defences in the Kursk salient should be given priority, but also insisted that defences be constructed on all the main axes of advance open to the Germans. Stalin's outlook diverged from the opinion of such now highly experienced generals as Vatutin and Zhukov, who had concluded that Kursk was certainly the sector on which the *Ostheer* would attack, that the correct Soviet response was to fortify that front as strongly as possible to absorb the Panzer offensive, but that reserves accumulated by the Stavka should not be committed exclusively to Kursk but be apportioned to provide a *masse de manoeuvre* with which the Red Army might subsequently unleash a counterstroke on its own account. As Zhukov put it to Stalin on 8 April, 'An offensive on the part of our troops in the near future aimed at forestalling the enemy I consider to be pointless. It would be better if we grind down the enemy in our defences, break up his tank forces and then, introducing fresh reserves, go over to a general offensive to pulverise once and for all his main concentrations.'

Hitler, though committed in principle to the concept of an attack on the Kursk salient, was changeable about date and still oddly indecisive about the form of the attack. Although on 15 April he signed the order committing Army Groups South and Centre to an attack on the Kursk bulge on 3 May, he almost immediately had second thoughts and proposed to Zeitzler that the attack be launched against the nose of the salient. The suggestion was in defiance of all military orthodoxy – which holds that troops in a salient must always be cut off rather than attacked frontally – and Zeitzler was able to talk him out of it on 21 April. Then Model, who was to command one of the two armies consigned to the convergent attacks, persuaded him that the observed strength of the Russian defences would require more time for penetration than the plan allowed unless he got extra tanks. Hitler accordingly approved a postponement of some days while Guderian, his new Inspector of Panzer Troops, found the extra tanks. With the involvement of Guderian (by title a mere administrator) in operational planning, delays began to lengthen. Guderian was well informed about both the quantity and the quality of Soviet tank production, and it was his purpose to raise Germany's production to match it. On 2 May he outlined to Hitler a schedule of tank deliveries which made postponement look advisable. He promised not only more tanks – over 1000 a month on a rising scale, ten times Germany's annual output in 1939 – but better tanks, including the new Panther Mark V and the 'family' of 88-mm gun-carriers, Hornets, Tigers and Ferdinands, which were believed to be invincible on the battlefield; but he – not Speer – warned that the Panther, on which

Hitler counted heavily for the success of Kursk, had not yet shed development 'bugs'. On 4 May, after yet another conference with his leading generals at Munich, Hitler accordingly postponed the Kursk attack, now condemned Citadel, until mid-June.

Soviet industry, however, was not only continuing to turn out tanks at twice the German rate but in addition to the outstanding T-34 was now producing heavier models, including the KV-85, with an 85-mm gun, the first mark of the super-heavy Joseph Stalin, which would eventually mount a 122-mm gun, and various equivalents of the turretless assault guns which the Germans favoured. Russian production of anti-tank weapons was even more impressive. Over 200 reserve anti-tank regiments, equipped with powerful 76-mm guns, had been formed, while 21,000 lighter anti-tank guns had been issued to infantry units. 'By the summer of 1943', Professor John Erickson judges, 'the Soviet infantryman [was] equipped as no other for anti-tank fighting.' As well as armoured and anti-armoured resources the Red Army now had enormous quantities of artillery. 'Artillery is the god of war,' Stalin had said. It had always been the leading arm of Russian armies, and by the summer of 1943 the Red Army's artillery was the strongest in the world, in both quality and quantity of equipment. During 1942 whole divisions of artillery had been formed – an entirely novel military concept – and equipped with the new 152-mm and 203-mm guns. They included four divisions of Katyusha rocket-launchers; with this revolutionary weapon each division could fire 3840 projectiles weighing 230 tons in a single salvo. The Katyusha, which the Germans were hastily to copy, became one of the most feared weapons of the eastern battlefield, dazing and disorientating infantrymen who were not directly disabled by its tremendous blast effect.

This re-equipment of the Red Army, made possible by the regeneration of production in the factories transported eastward behind the Urals during the terrible Barbarossa months, spelt great danger to the *Ostheer*. More ominously, in accordance with the appreciation made by the Stavka on 12 April, huge quantities of material were poured into the Kursk salient during April and May, including 10,000 guns, anti-tank guns and rocket launchers. The civilian population of the salient – about 60 by 120 miles in area – was mobilised to dig entrenchments and anti-tank ditches, while army engineers laid mines in a density of over 3000 to each kilometre of front. The troops defending it, the Centre Front (Rokossovsky) and the Voronezh Front (Vatutin), laid out their own defensive positions, each consisting of a forward line three miles deep and two rearward positions. Eventually, with 300,000 civilians labouring in the rear, the Kursk salient was to contain eight defensive lines, echeloned to a depth of 100 miles. Nothing like it had ever been seen on a battlefield, not even on the Western Front at the height of trench warfare.

Hitler's prevarication over choosing a date for Operation Citadel reflected his doubts about the feasibility of the operation – and those of commanders committed to carrying it out, like Model of the Ninth Army. Model had originally asked for the plan to allow two days for his armour to penetrate the northern face of the salient. On 27 April, however, he arrived at Berchtesgaden, where Hitler was holidaying from the forest dankness of

Rastenburg, with air photographs of the Russian defences at Kursk and a request for more tanks and more time. 'When Model told me,' Hitler recalled a year later, 'that he would need three days – that is when I got cold feet.' Cold feet or not, Hitler took no decisive action to cancel Citadel. His self-confidence remained weakened, while Zeitzler's was strong. The fighting infantry subaltern of the First World War was bent on doing 'something' during 1943, and for him that meant fighting a battle on the Eastern Front, his sole area of responsibility. Hitler also agreed that something had to be done, if the Red Army was not to grow unchecked in strength for a major offensive in 1944. However, besides the persisting depression caused by Stalingrad, he had other things on his mind: not only the worsening situation in Tunisia, ended by the surrender of the German-Italian army in May, but the increasingly precarious position of Mussolini, the uncertainty over where the Allies would strike next in the Mediterranean, and the growing civil defence crisis in Germany, where the British Bomber Command and the US Army Air Force were making heavier and deeper strikes each week. Three times during June he postponed Citadel again: on 6 June, when Guderian demanded more time to accumulate tank reserves, on 18 June, and again on 25 June, when Model raised more objections. Finally on 29 June he announced that he would return to Rastenburg and that Citadel would begin on 5 July. As he explained to his staff when he arrived on 1 July, 'The Russians are biding their time. They are using their time replenishing for the winter. We must not allow that or there will be fresh crises. . . . So we have got to disrupt them.'

The demand for 'disruption' was a far cry from the trumpet call to *Blitzkrieg* uttered in the summers of 1941 and 1942. It revealed how much Hitler had narrowed his horizons during the two years of the Russian war, how strong the Red Army remained despite the devastation he had inflicted on it and how weakened the *Ostheer* was by the relentless programme of offensives and 'standfasts' to which he had committed it in the previous two years. The Red Army numbered 6.5 million at the beginning of July 1943, an actual increase since the outbreak of the war, despite the loss of over 3 million men as prisoners alone; the *Ostheer*, by contrast, fielded 3,100,000, a net decrease of 200,000 since 22 June 1941. The number of its divisions was static at about 180, but all establishments, of both men and equipment (except in the favoured SS divisions), were below strength. In the Red Army divisional establishments were also low, about 5000 men each, but the number of its divisions equalled the German, was rising, and was complemented by large numbers of 'non-divisional' units, including the specialised artillery formations. Moreover, while the German army was dependent exclusively on the output of home industry to supply its needs, the Russians were now the beneficiaries of a growing tide of Lend-Lease aid, including vast numbers of vital motor supply vehicles; no less than 183,000 modern American trucks had arrived by mid-1943 alone. Meanwhile war was destroying the *Ostheer's* means of transport, the horse; by the spring of 1942 it had lost a quarter of a million horses, half those with which it had entered Russia, and losses had continued at an equivalent rate ever since.

The issue of manoeuvre, however, was not central to Citadel, where battering power alone was to count. German battering power was considerable. It was distributed between Model's Ninth Army, which was to attack the northern face of the Kursk salient, and Hoth's Fourth Panzer Army, which was to attack the southern. Together they disposed of some 2700 tanks supported by 1800 aircraft, the largest concentration of force against such a confined area yet seen on the Eastern Front. Model controlled eight Panzer and Panzergrenadier divisions, with seven infantry divisions in support, Hoth eleven Panzer, one Panzergrenadier and seven infantry divisions. The plan was straightforward. Model and Hoth were to cut into the 'neck' of the Kursk salient, between Orel and Kharkov, join hands, and then envelop and destroy Vatutin's and Rokossovsky's sixty divisions.

— Into the furnace —

The attack began at 4.30 am on 5 July, a date of which Stalin's 'Lucy ring' in Switzerland had apparently given him warning. Erickson has described the battle:

Within twelve hours both sides were furiously stoking the great glowing furnace of the battle for Kursk. The armour continued to mass and move on a scale unlike anything seen anywhere else in the war. Both commands watched this fiery escalation with grim, numbed satisfaction: German officers had never seen so many Soviet aircraft, while the Soviet commanders ... had never before seen such formidable massing of German tanks, all blotched in their green and yellow camouflage. These were tank armadas on the move, coming on in great squadrons of 100 and 200 machines or more, a score of Tigers and Ferdinand assault guns in the first echelon, groups of 50-60 medium tanks in the second and then the infantry screened by the armour. Now that the Soviet tank armies were moving up into the main defensive fields, almost 4000 Soviet tanks and nearly 3000 German tanks and assault guns were being steadily drawn into this gigantic battle, which roared on hour after hour, leaving ever greater heaps of the dead and the dying, clumps of blazing or disabled armour, shattered personnel carriers and lorries, and thickening columns of smoke coiling over the steppe.

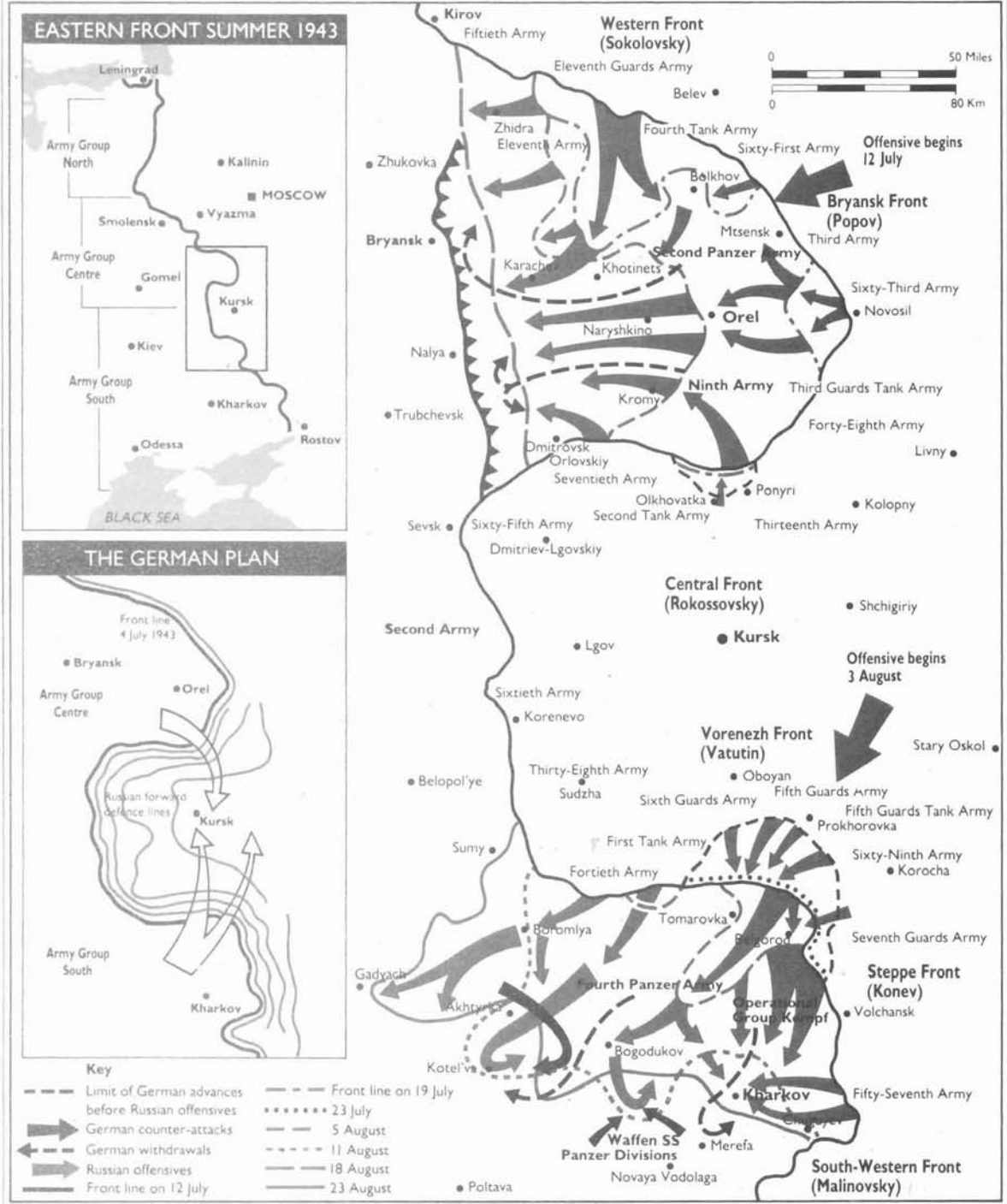
Rokossovsky counter-attacked Model on 6 July, trying to recapture the ground lost on the first day, but his troops were rolled back by the advancing German divisions. On 7 July the 18th, 19th, 2nd and 20th Panzer Divisions approached the high ground at Olk-hovatka, thirty miles from the start-line, from which they would be able to look down on Kursk from the north and dominate Soviet lines of communication within the salient. The Soviet defenders were wiped out, but reserves arrived just in time to deny the Germans their prize. Meanwhile on the southern sector Hoth, who had three SS Panzer divisions under command, *Leibstandarte*, *Das Reich* and *Totenkopf*, as well as the 3rd and 11th Panzer Divi-

sions and the powerful *Grossdeutschland* Panzergrenadier Division, was also making dogged progress. Vatutin contemplated launching a counter-attack on 6 July but, in view of the strength the Germans deployed, decided to remain on the defensive. By the evening of 7 July Hoth's Panzer 'fist' had smashed through the Soviet defensive crust to within twelve miles of Oboyan, which defended Kursk from the south. The junction of the northern and southern Panzer thrusts, on which the logic of Citadel depended, now seemed near to realisation.

The Russian defences, however, were proving extremely costly to penetrate. The whole front was crisscrossed by earthworks, while the Soviet anti-tank batteries were organised as single units, which discharged concentrated salvoes of shot at single tanks in the German spearheads. During 10 July Hoth was obliged to bring up his armoured reserve, the 10th and SS Viking Divisions, to sustain progress on the southern sector, but the pace of advance began to slow none the less. Moreover, Zhukov and Vasilevsky, who assumed direct control of the battle from Stalin and the Stavka on 11 July, were now about to unleash the Soviet reserves in a general counter-attack. During 11 July they committed the Bryansk Front (Popov), on Rokossovsky's right, to a drive into Model's flank. More importantly, on 12 July they brought forward the tank reserves held under Konev's Steppe Front to engage Hoth's Fourth Panzer Army south of Kursk. This decision was to precipitate perhaps the greatest tank battle of the Second World War. Erickson writes: 'In the area of Prokhorovka two great bodies of armour, Soviet and German, rushed into a huge swirling tank battle with well over a thousand tanks in action. The two groups of German armour . . . mustered some 600 and 300 tanks respectively; Rotmistrov's Fifth Guards Army [from Konev's reserve] just under 900 tanks – approximate parity, except that the Germans were fielding about 100 Tigers.' The battle blazed all day

at point-blank range as the Soviet T-34s and a few KVs raced into the German formation, whose Tigers stood immobile to deliver their fire; once at close range with scores of machines churning about in individual engagements, front and side armour was more easily penetrated, when the tank ammunition would explode, hurling turrets yards away from the shattered hulls or sending up great spurts of fire. . . . With the coming of the deep night, when thunderclouds piled up over the battlefield, the gunfire slackened and the tanks slewed to a halt. Silence fell on the tanks, the guns and the dead, over which the lightning flickered and the rain began to rustle. The *Prokhorovskoe poboishe*, the 'slaughter at Prokhorovka', was momentarily done, with more than 300 German tanks (among them 70 Tigers) . . . lying wrecked on the steppe . . . more than half the Soviet Fifth Guards Tank Army lay shattered in the same area. Both sides had taken and delivered fearful punishment. The German attack from the south and west, however, had been held. At Oboyan the attack had been halted.

OPERATION CITADEL



It was not only on Hoth's southern sector that Operation Citadel failed to reach its objectives. 'On the broad slopes of the Sredne-Russki heights on Rokossovsky's Central Front the attack on Kursk from the north [by Model's Ninth Army] had been halted also, and Rokossovsky had considerable reserves in hand.'

No one was readier to admit defeat than Hitler. 'That's the last time I will heed the advice of my General Staff,' he told his adjutants after a meeting with Manstein and Kluge on 13 July to decide the future of the operation, and he ordered Citadel to be closed down. Manstein was sure that he could still cut off the salient, if only he were given the last armoured reserve on the Eastern Front. Hitler would have none of it. His generals had persuaded him that the defences of the Kursk salient, despite their unparalleled depth and strength, could be penetrated by armoured assault, and they had been proved wrong. Citadel flickered on until 15 July but the decision had gone to the Russians, if at terrible cost; over half their tank fleet used in the battle was gone. The cost to the Germans, however, had also been very high: the 3rd, 17th and 19th Panzer Divisions, for example, now had only a hundred tanks between them, instead of the 450 with which they began. Moreover, these were strategic losses. German tank output, for all Guderian's – and Speer's – efforts, did not approach the thousand per month scheduled for 1943; it averaged only 330. More tanks than that had been lost on several days during Citadel, 160 out of Fourth Army's Panzers having simply broken down on the battlefield. As a result, the central armoured reserve on which the *Ostheer* had always hitherto been able to call in a crisis was now dissipated and could not be rebuilt out of current production, which was committed to the replacement of normal losses. The Red Army, thanks to the burgeoning output of heavy industry beyond the Urals, was producing tanks at a rate which would approach 2500 a month in 1944, far greater than the rate at which tanks were lost, and so sufficient to increase its net complement of armoured formations. The main significance of Kursk, therefore, was that it deprived Germany of the means to seize the initiative in the future and so, by default, transferred it to the Soviet Union.

The Russian exploitation of the Kursk victory was at first clumsy and tentative. A Russian attack towards Orel, north of the Kursk salient, involved Soviet armour in a heavy battle with four Panzer divisions which tried to block its advance, although the Germans suffered losses. A simultaneous drive on Belgorod, south of the salient, organised by a recently arrived commander, Tolbukhin, was counter-attacked and the troops committed forced to retire on 1 August. However, these Russian attacks, by drawing off Kluge's and

The Battle of Kursk, July 1943. Contemplating this titanic battle, Hitler confessed that the prospect made his stomach turn over. Codenamed Citadel, this was the last great German offensive aimed at regaining the initiative after the disaster at Stalingrad. Guderian considered Kursk 'a decisive defeat'. The armoured divisions committed to the battle remained unfit for action for a considerable time.

Manstein's remaining reserves, had exposed Kharkov to a renewed offensive which Stalin had approved on 22 July. It was launched on 3 August, with devastating effect. A single German infantry division, the 167th, was first subjected to bombardment by the massed artillery of the Soviet Sixth Guards Army belonging to Vatutin's Voronezh Front. After several hours, when its sector had been pulverised, a Russian tank column broke through. On 5 August it took Belgorod and by 8 August had opened up a gap on the flank of the Fourth Panzer Army which led directly to the crossings of the Dnieper a hundred miles away.

Manstein now informed Hitler that he must either receive a reinforcement of twenty divisions from the west or yield the Donetz basin, with all the mineral and industrial resources which were so valuable to the German and the Russian war effort. Hitler responded to this ultimatum not by conceding one or the other condition but by proposing a third option. Far from being able to offer reinforcements, he was actually withdrawing divisions, including the elite *Leibstandarte*, from Russia to Italy to protect his position there which was increasingly under threat. However in view of the deepening crisis in the east, he now conceded the desirability (which hitherto he had consistently rejected) of constructing an 'East Wall' to match the West Wall along the Rhine, behind which the *Ostheer* could defend the territory captured in 1941-2. It was to run from the shore of the Sea of Azov northward to Zaporozhe, Army Group South's headquarters, and then along the lines of the rivers Dnieper and Desna via Kiev and Chernigov, north to Pskov and Lake Peipus until it reached the Baltic at Narva.

He ordered work on this line, which was also to be a 'stop' position behind which the *Ostheer* was not to retreat, to begin at once. In fact both the manpower and the resources to construct it were lacking, while the Red Army would not concede the time necessary to undertake the work. Mounting simultaneous drives all along the southern



Russian armour in the Kursk 'bulge'. During the battle the Red Army deployed some 2600 tanks and 10,000 guns.

sector of the front, the Red Army took Kharkov, the most fought-over city in the Soviet Union, on 23 August (it was to remain in Russian hands thereafter) and crossed the Donetz and its short tributary the Mius at the same time. These drives threatened to envelop Kleist's Army Group A, still holding its bridgehead beyond the Crimea, and compromised the position of the Sixth Army, the southernmost formation of Manstein's Army Group South, above the Crimea itself. On 31 August Hitler sanctioned further withdrawals in the south. But Army Group Centre's defences had now also been penetrated in three places, and the whole lower sector of the Ostheer's front was crumbling under the weight of the Red Army's might. By 8 September the Russian vanguard was within thirty miles of the Dnieper and by 14 September was threatening Kiev. Kluge's Army Group Centre was unable to sustain its defence of the Desna, designated only a month earlier as part of the 'East Wall', and on the same day Sokolovsky's West Front began a drive against Smolensk in Army Group Centre's sector, focus of the great encirclement battle of 1941 in the heyday of the Ostheer's Russian triumphs. Next day Hitler gave permission for a retreat to the line of the Dnieper, Sozh and Pronya rivers, roughly that reached in the great *Blitzkrieg* of July 1941; but the instruction came too late to permit an ordered withdrawal. It developed into a race for the river positions which many German formations lost, so that by 30 September the Red Army had five bridgeheads over the Dnieper – some seized by parachute assault – including a large lodgement to the immediate south of the Pripet Marshes.

For the Ostheer this was a disastrous outcome of the summer's fighting, since the Dnieper, with its high western scarp slope, was the strongest defensive position in southern Russia. During five weeks of continuous combat it had been forced back 150 miles along a 650-mile front and, although Hitler had decreed that it should conduct a 'scorched earth' retreat, in which factories, mines, power stations, collective farms and railways were destroyed, his demolition teams had not been able to obliterate the road network along which the Red Army made its way forward. Moreover, the fortification he had decreed had made no progress at all. The 'East Wall' remained a line on the map, nowhere transformed into earthworks, minefields or obstacle belts.

— The growing strength of the Red Army —

For the Red Army, by contrast, the summer fighting had been a triumph. It had regained all the objectives laid down for it by Stalin and the Stavka in the aftermath of the Kursk victory and though its human losses and material expenditures continued to run at a high rate – it had expended the astonishing total of 42 million rounds of artillery ammunition in July and August – its strength and therefore its offensive capabilities continued to grow. By October its strength stood at 126 rifle corps (of two to three divisions each), 72 independent rifle divisions, five tank armies (of three to five divisions), 24 tank corps (of two to three divisions), 13 mechanised corps (of two to three divisions), 80 tank brigades, 106 independent tank regiments, and a vast array of artillery formations – 6 artillery corps,

26 artillery divisions, 43 regiments of self-propelled guns, 20 artillery brigades and 7 divisions of Katyusha rocket-launchers. To mark the advances the Red Army had made, moreover, its fronts were now renamed. The Voronezh, Steppe, South-West and South Fronts became the First, Second, Third and Fourth Ukrainian Fronts in the first week of October, as they paused to regroup for the next stage of their offensive. Those to their north would shortly be retitled the First and Second White Russian and the First and Second Baltic Fronts. The Red Army was on the march.

Winter was its favoured time for attack. It was a season to which the Russian soldier was more accustomed and for which he was better equipped than his German counterpart. The German infantryman's feet froze in his 'diceboxes', as the army boots were called. The Red Army man, shod in felt boots, of which 13 million pairs were manufactured to Soviet specifications in the United States during the war and shipped back under Lend-Lease arrangements, resisted frostbite; he also knew the tricks, learned painfully by the Wehrmacht, of keeping motor vehicles running at sub-zero temperatures – mixing petrol with lubricating oil was one of them – and of caring for draught animals when frost formed icicles round their nostrils. Not until this third winter, when Hitler was at last prepared to admit that victory was not imminent, did the *Ostheer* receive adequate supplies of cold-weather clothing (in the first winter men had stuffed their uniforms with torn-up newspaper); Soviet soldiers received sheepskins and furs as normal issue.

As the first frosts of winter descended, the newly named Ukrainian fronts began their attacks across the lower Dnieper. The Red Army's recent accretion of numbers and material did not suffice for an offensive along the whole front, so for the next eighteen months it was to proceed by a sequence of advances, first on the right or southern sector, then on the left or northern sector of the front; this autumn manoeuvre was to be the first of its left-hand strokes. The target presented itself. By far the most vulnerable formation in the *Ostheer* was the Seventeenth Army, which occupied the Crimea and its approaches. Hitler attached disproportionate importance to the possession of the Crimea, both because he had fought so hard to acquire it in the summer of 1942 and because he was obsessed by the belief that it provided the best point for aerial attack on the Ploesti oilfields. When the Fourth Ukrainian Front (Tolbukhin) opened a major attack towards it on 27 October, his first thought was to request reinforcements from the Romanians, who he believed would share his perception of the developing danger; when the Romanian leader General Ion Antonescu refused to raise his stake in the Eastern Front, Hitler simply decreed that the Seventeenth Army must hold on and fight it out. Under heavy Soviet pressure its nearest neighbour, the Sixth Army, was quickly driven back beyond the land neck which links the Crimea to the mainland (the Perekop isthmus), while landings were made from the Asiatic shore on the Kerch peninsula. By 30 November not only were 210,000 German soldiers isolated in the Crimea; they were also threatened with battle on the territory they were defending.

Meanwhile the other three Ukrainian fronts had gone over to the offensive along the



Deep lines of exhaustion are etched on the face of a German infantryman during the fighting in the Kiev salient in December 1943.

whole length of the lower Dnieper, with results which threatened the flanks of Manstein's Army Group South. The Third and Second Ukrainian Fronts first seized a large bridgehead near Krivoy Rog on Manstein's southern flank; then, on 3 November, the First Ukrainian Front broke across the Dnieper below the Pripet to recapture Kiev, in the most spectacular reversal of fortunes on the Eastern Front since the encirclement of Stalingrad.

During November the White Russian and Baltic Fronts also moved into action north of the Pripet, advancing from Bryansk to recapture Smolensk – a place of agony for the Red Army in 1941 – and threaten Vitebsk. They were now mobile on Napoleon's route to

Moscow of 1812, but in the opposite direction, and giving Hitler cause to fear for the safety of the Baltic states and the approaches to the 1939 frontier of eastern Poland.

Unseasonably mild weather in December, which left unfrozen the network of waterways and small lakes above the Pripet, temporarily spared the *Ostheer* from the difficulty of defending the Smolensk–Minsk route westward across the upper Dnieper. However, Hitler had announced in Führer Directive No. 51 (3 November) that he imminently expected an Anglo-American invasion in the west and that he could 'no longer take responsibility for further weakening in the west, in favour of other theatres of war'. Indeed, he had 'therefore decided to reinforce its defences'; the decision meant that the *Ostheer* could no longer count on reinforcements from the quieter, so-called OKW sectors – France, Italy and Scandinavia – but must fight its battles with the strength it had available and such replacements as the Home Army could find.

'The vast extent of territory in the east', Hitler conceded in Führer Directive No. 51, 'makes it possible for us to lose ground, even on a large scale, without a fatal blow being struck to the nervous system of Germany.' This admission implied that he might be ready to accept the submissions of his eastern marshals, Manstein foremost among them, that the most profitable way of fighting the Red Army was to employ a strategy of withdrawing from territory before mounting a further attack. The implication was not to be borne out in practice. During the winter of 1943–4 the Red Army came on in even greater strength than before; but Hitler's reluctance to concede territory proved as fixed as ever – nowhere more so than on the southern front. Hitler not only clung to the hope of retaining the mines at Nikopol and Krivoy Rog but constantly emphasised the danger of allowing the Crimea to become a Soviet air base for attack on the Romanian oilfields and – a particular obsession – argued that its loss would encourage Turkey to enter the war on the Allied side.

— Hitler orders retreat —

Manstein, who had withdrawn his command post to Hitler's old summer headquarters at Vinnitsa in the Ukraine, travelled to Rastenburg twice during January to argue the case for withdrawal, but on both occasions it was refused. His Army Group South, moreover, fought stoutly to hold its front together against relentless attacks by the First and Second Ukrainian Fronts, now under Zhukov's direct command, and at first gave ground less slowly than Kleist's Army Group A. Assaulted by the Third and Fourth Ukrainian Fronts on 10 January, Army Group A was nearly encircled in its efforts to retain Nikopol and Krivoy Rog, and after Hitler issued formal permission for a retreat which could be no longer avoided it eventually escaped, at the expense of abandoning most of its artillery and transport. By mid-February, however, Army Group South was also in severe straits; two of its corps were encircled by Vatutin between the Dnieper and Vinnitsa west of Cherkassy and were rescued on 17 February only by concentrating all the available armour to help

them break out. This operation by the First and Fourth Panzer Armies, which had previously halted a menacing thrust by Konev's Second Ukrainian Front towards Uman, caused Manstein's tanks to be wrongly placed to check a subsequent onset by the First Ukrainian Front south of Pripet. By 1 March the First Ukrainian Front had crossed the 1939 frontier of Poland, was menacing Lvov and was less than 100 miles from the Carpathians, southern Europe's only mountain barrier against an invasion from the east.

There was a crisis too on the northern front, where Army Group North, now commanded by General Georg von Küchler, was attacked on 15 January. In a whirlwind advance three Soviet fronts, the Leningrad, Volkhov and Second Baltic, had moved to the assault and by 19 January had breached Army Group North's defences in three places, widened the narrow corridor connecting Leningrad to the rest of Russia and liberated the city after a thousand days of siege; the blockade, which had starved a million Leningraders to death, was formally declared at an end on 26 January, when the city's entire artillery fired a twenty-four-gun salute. Behind Leningrad, however, ran the only length of the projected 'East Wall' which had been brought to a state of completion. During the early stages of the Leningrad offensive Hitler withheld permission for a withdrawal into it, demanding that Küchler, whom he reproached with having the strongest army in the east, should fortify an intermediate position on the Luga river. As it became clear that time and resources lacked, however, on 13 February he was obliged to sanction a retreat to the 'Panther' line, as the East Wall along the line from Narva to Lake Peipus and Lake Pskov was denominated. The retreat, like the prospect of abandoning the Crimea, caused him acute political misgivings, since he believed – with reason – that it would encourage Finland to open secret negotiations with the Russians for a separate peace.

Hitler's current difficulties remained military, however, not political. Zeitzler, his chief of staff, fed him with assurances in late February that 18 million Russians of military age had now been eliminated and that Stalin disposed of only 2 million in his manpower reserve; in mid-October Colonel Reinhard Gehlen, head of the Foreign Armies East section, had warned, by contrast, that the Red Army would in future 'surpass Germany in terms of manpower, equipment and the field of propaganda'. Gehlen was right, Zeitzler wrong. The Red Army had now assembled exactly the sort of central armoured reserve which Hitler had allowed OKH to cast away in the cauldron of Kursk and was able to move it about the front as opportunity for breakthrough offered. By mid-February the Stavka had concentrated five of its tank armies opposite Army Group South; the sixth arrived at the end of the month. On 18 February Stalin issued orders for them to attack at the beginning of March: the First Ukrainian Front was to open the offensive on 4 March; the Second and Third were to join it on 5 and 6 March. Between them they outnumbered the Germans opposite by two to one in infantry and more than two to one in armour.

There was a last-minute impediment. Vatutin, commanding the First Ukrainian Front, fell into an ambush mounted by Ukrainian separatist partisans – combatants in a shadow war between Russians, Germans and Poles for local dominance over the Pripet

borderlands which the onset of the Red Army was now making irrelevant – and was mortally wounded on 29 February. He was a grave loss to the Soviet high command; but his place was immediately taken by Zhukov, who, as at Stalingrad, exercised direct control of the coming offensive. It opened with one of the devastating bombardments which had become the signature of the Red Army's operational methods ever since the enormous wartime expansion of the artillery. The First Ukrainian Front quickly opened a gap between the flanks of the First and Fourth Panzer Armies and rolled forward; the Fourth Panzer Army was encircled at Kamenets near Lake Ilmen and forced to break out. The Second and Third Ukrainian Fronts made even faster progress against the weaker forces of Army Group A. By 15 April they had broken and crossed all three of the river lines on which the Germans might have hoped to stand, the Bug, the Dniester and the Prut, had retaken Odessa and had left the Seventeenth Army isolated in the Crimea to their rear. On 8 April moreover, Tolbukhin's Fourth Ukrainian Front suddenly enlarged its bridgehead on the Crimean Kerch peninsula, rolled forward, and surrounded the survivors of the Seventeenth Army in a small pocket around Sevastopol, exactly as the French and British had done to the Russians in 1854 – and Rundstedt to the Red Army in 1941. The Russian defenders of Sevastopol had held out heroically in the eight-month siege from November 1941 to July 1942. In early May 1944 Hitler conceded that he could not sustain the city's defence and it was evacuated in four nights between 4 and 8 May; over 30,000 German soldiers were nevertheless abandoned within the perimeter and made captive when the Russians liberated the city on 9 May.

The spring offensive on the southern front had been a triumph for the Red Army. Between March and mid-April it had advanced 165 miles, overrun three potential defensive positions, recovered, if in gravely devastated condition, some of the most productive territory in the Soviet Union, deprived Hitler of his cherished strategic outpost and inflicted irreparable damage on Army Groups A, South and Centre. The Seventeenth Army, the garrison of the Crimea, had disappeared altogether, with the loss of over 100,000 German and allied Romanian troops.

The débâcle in the south had already prompted Hitler to impose a cosmetic change on the *Ostheer* there. On 30 March he had summoned Manstein and Kleist to Rastenburg, told them that what the southern front needed was 'a new name, a new slogan and a commander expert in defensive strategy' and announced that they were relieved. Manstein was to be replaced by Model, the general who had stabilised the Leningrad front on the 'Panther Line', and Kleist by General Ferdinand Schörner, an even more fanatical devotee of the Nazi regime and a consummate promoter of his own reputation. Thus at a stroke the two great Panzer breakthrough experts were removed, to be replaced by men whose capacity was for the ruthless subjection of their soldiers to orders and slavish obedience to the Führer's authority. Zeitzler, also a disciplinarian, retained enough integrity to offer his own resignation at the news. Hitler refused it, with the warning, 'A general cannot resign'

In a wholly empty gesture, Hitler also ordered a few days later that Army Groups

South and A were to be renamed North and South Ukraine respectively, in token of his stated determination to recapture that territory, of which none now remained in his possession. However, not only did he lack the means to mount any offensive or even to find the reserves to shore up a defensive battle; in the spring of 1944 he was faced with the threat of seaborne invasion in France and the reality of an Allied breakthrough in Italy. In the east it was Stalin who retained the strategic initiative and who, on the heels of his Ukrainian triumph, was planning a further offensive which would clear the *Ostheer* from the soil of Russia once and for all.

During May Stalin commissioned two of his senior staff officers, S. M. Shtemenko, General Staff chief of operations, and Timoshenko, representing the Stavka, to examine each sector of the Soviet front – 2000 miles long between the Baltic and Black Seas – and report on possibilities. Their analysis was as follows: to persist in the advance towards the Carpathians, despite the political advantages of heightening the threat to Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary and ultimately Yugoslavia, was dangerous because it would lengthen the flank presented to Army Group Centre. To advance from Leningrad down the Baltic coast would menace East Prussia but not the German heartland, and would also risk a counterstroke by Army Group Centre. By elimination, therefore, the desirable strategy was to wipe out Army Group Centre itself, which still occupied the most important sector of historically Russian territory and also guarded the route to Warsaw, on the high road to Berlin. To do so would require organisational changes, notably the reinforcement and division of the White Russian and Baltic Fronts which opposed it. However, given the Red Army's new-found ability to concentrate strength rapidly on an altered axis, such a redeployment was feasible.

— Operation Bagration —

During April the 'western' theatre of operations was reorganised. The two White Russian and Baltic Fronts each became three. New generals were appointed, and senior commanders – Vasilevsky and Zhukov – were nominated to supervisory roles. Tank reinforcements and artillery reserves were concentrated on the White Russian fronts. Diversionary moves were co-ordinated at the extreme southern and northern ends of the whole theatre of operations – the latter not merely diversionary, since a subsidiary component of the summer offensive was intended to be a surprise attack designed to drive Finland out of the war. Finally, the First Ukrainian Front, south of the Pripet, commanded by the experienced Konev, was filled out with tank armies drawn from the other Ukrainian fronts to mount a long-range encircling manoeuvre round the Pripet Marshes into the flank of Model's Army Group North and eventually against that of Army Group Centre itself. The operation was to be the most ambitious the Red Army had ever staged. All it lacked was a name; on 20 May, when Stalin received the detailed plan from the General Staff, he announced that it would be called Bagration, after the general mortally wounded

at Borodino on the route between White Russia and Moscow during Napoleon's invasion of 1812.

The attack on Finland by the Leningrad Front began on 9 June and, though mounted only with marginal force, soon consumed the tiny Finnish army's reserves. On 28 July the Finnish President asked leave to transfer his office to the national leader, Marshal Mannerheim, who at once began negotiations for a separate peace. His approaches were to be answered at the end of August.

Meanwhile Stalin had set a date for the opening of Bagration. At Tehran the previous November he had assured Churchill and Roosevelt that the operation would be timed to coincide with D-Day. The date he chose was 22 June, the third anniversary of Hitler's unprovoked and surprise attack on the Soviet Union. In the three preceding nights the Russian partisan groups based in Army Group Centre's rear area busied themselves laying demolition charges on the rail lines which supplied its logistic needs; over 40,000 charges were exploded on 19, 20 and 21 June. Both OKH and OKW nevertheless discounted the possibility that these attacks supplied evidence of an offensive in preparation. Since early May the Eastern Front had been quiet, and Gehlen's Foreign Armies East section insisted that such signs as there were indicated the preparation of a new offensive against Army Group North Ukraine; it was what Gehlen called 'the Balkans solution', precisely what the Stavka had rejected. The Luftwaffe, through its own intelligence service and reconnaissance flights, took a contrary view; it had established that 4500 Soviet aircraft were concentrated against Army Group Centre. Warning of this, which came to Hitler on 17 June, alarmed him and prompted him to order IV Air Corps, his last intact air striking force in the east, to undertake spoiling attacks. However, the Russian concentration was too large for any attack to be effective, and it was now too late to move ground forces to stand behind Army Group Centre's front.

At 4 am on 22 June Bagration opened with a short artillery bombardment, behind which infantry reconnaissance units moved to the attack. Zhukov was anxious that the assault should not waste itself on empty positions. The real offensive developed next day, when heavier infantry waves supported by dense formations of aircraft pressed up to the main German defences, opening the way for the tanks in their rear. They were the vanguard of 166 divisions, supported by 2700 tanks and 1300 assault guns, against which Army Group Centre, on an 800-mile front, could oppose only thirty-seven divisions, weakly supported by armour.

The first German formation to suffer disaster was the Ninth Army, holding the southern sector of the army group's front. It was threatened with encirclement by the First and Second White Russian Fronts on the second day of the offensive, and when, on 26 June, Hitler gave it permission to fall back east of Minsk to the river Berezina (on which Napoleon's Grand Army had been savaged in 1812) it was too late. Its neighbour, the Fourth Army, was the next to suffer. Although also granted permission to withdraw on 26 June, it was trapped in a wider encirclement by the First and Third White Russian Fronts

and devastated east of Minsk by 29 June. At the end of the first week of Bagration the three German armies which had stood in its immediate path had lost between them nearly 200,000 men and 900 tanks; the Ninth Army and the Third Panzer Army were shadows, each with only three or four operational divisions, and the Fourth Army was in full retreat. Hitler was now confronted with the prospect of a vast gap opening on the Eastern Front, and he was troubled simultaneously by other crises, great and small. The Allied landing in France had secured a foothold, Finland was crumbling, and his favourite general, Dietl, who had saved the situation in northern Norway in 1940, had been killed in an air crash while flying back to secure the German position in the Arctic on 22 June. On 28 June he replaced Field Marshal Ernst von Busch with the general who was emerging as his 'fireman', Model, at Army Group Centre, also leaving him Army Group North Ukraine as a source of reserves.

However, not even Model's firefighting abilities could quell the conflagration which was destroying his army group. By 2 July he concluded that there was no hope of getting the Fourth Army back intact to Minsk, since it was now pinned against the Berezina, which the Second White Russian Front had already crossed at Lepel. He therefore concentrated his efforts on trying to hold open escape routes on each side of the city, but the rapid advance of Soviet armour – Rotmistrov's Fifth Tank Army made thirty miles in a day down the Minsk–Moscow highway on 2 July – quickly quashed that plan. Minsk fell on 3 July while the Fourth Army stood encircled to the east; 40,000 of its 105,000 troops died trying to break out. After a last attempt to airdrop supplies on 5 July, the survivors began to surrender; the commander of XII Corps offered a formal surrender on 8 July; and by 11 July there was no further resistance in the pocket.

The encirclement of the Fourth Army effectively concluded the Battle of White Russia; the victory was formally celebrated on 17 July, when 57,000 captives were marched through silent crowds in the streets of Moscow to the prison camps. By then the spearheads of the Soviet attacking fronts were already far to the west of the ground where the captives had been made prisoner. On 4 July the Stavka had designated new objectives for each of them, on an arc which ran from Riga in Latvia to Lublin in southern Poland and touched the frontier of East Prussia. For the first time in the war the territory of the Reich itself lay under threat. During the second week of July they drove on; by 10 July Vilna, the capital of Lithuania, was in Soviet hands and the Third White Russian Front had set foot on German soil. On 13 July Konev's First Ukrainian Front, with 1000 tanks and 3000 artillery pieces, opened its offensive by attacking Lvov, the old Austro-Hungarian bastion of eastern Galicia. A difficult objective, and strongly defended, Lvov fell on 27 July; by then Rokossovsky's First White Russian Front had swung southward round the edge of the Pripet Marshes to reach out towards it. At the end of the first week in August the two fronts had reached the line of the river Vistula and its tributary, the San, south of Warsaw, while the First Baltic and the other White Russian Fronts had crossed the Niemen and the Bug, the Vistula's northern tributary, to menace Warsaw from the other flank.

A sense of treachery oppressed Hitler at every hand. The common German soldiers remained loyal to him, but his officers, whom he had never trusted as a class, had begun to throw up traitors. The 'Seydlitz' group, formed from those who had surrendered at Stalingrad and gone over to the 'anti-fascist cause', had been active with radio and leaflet propaganda against Army Group Centre on the eve of Bagration; sixteen of the generals captured in its course were prevailed upon by the Russians to issue an 'appeal' on 22 July which alleged that its 350,000 lost soldiers had been 'sacrificed in a game of chance'. Two days earlier Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg had tried to kill him in his own headquarters, as the opening move in a conspiracy designed to replace the National Socialist regime with a government acceptable to the West. In the course of that day Zeitzler disappeared from his post as chief of staff; whether he was dismissed or simply fled has never been clarified. Then on 1 August the Polish Home Army seized the centre of Warsaw.

The motivation for the Polish Home Army's rising in Warsaw was complex; so too was the explanation for the failure of the Red Army – by 1 August close at hand on the eastern bank of the Vistula – to come to the patriots' rescue. On 29 July Radio Kosciuszko in the Soviet Union, run by Polish communists under Soviet control, had broadcast an appeal for an uprising and promised that Russian help was close at hand. The Home Army itself was caught in a dilemma: according to Erickson, 'not to act meant being stigmatised a virtual collaborator with the Nazis or else being written off as the nonentity which Stalin insisted the Polish underground was.' Stalin had his own satellite Polish army, the People's Army, currently fighting in Operation Bagration. He also had an alternative Polish government, known in the West as the 'Lublin Committee', from the recently captured Polish border city where it had proclaimed itself. On 3 August Stalin met Stanislaw Mikolajczyk, the Polish Prime Minister of the government in exile, who had come to Moscow for talks about future relationships with the Soviet regime. Stalin at first professed to be uninformed about the rising, then warned that he could not tolerate disunity between the 'London' and the 'Lublin' Poles, consistently refused facilities for British-based planes to supply arms to the insurgents, regretted that German counter-attacks near Warsaw made it impossible for the First White Russian Front (nearest to the city) to continue its advance, but finally assured Mikolajczyk, on 9 August, that 'we shall do everything possible to help'.

By then it was too late. Model had indeed scraped together enough armour to mount a holding attack on 29 July against Rokossovsky's First White Russian Front near Praga, the Warsaw suburb across the Vistula. Then Himmler, whom Hitler had entrusted with authority to put down the Warsaw rising, brought up troops, including the Dirlewanger brigade of German criminals and the Kaminski brigade of Russian turncoats, both recently formed by the SS for internal security operations judged to demand particular ruthlessness. Within twenty-four hours of the outbreak they opened a reign of terror against the city's inhabitants – combatant or not – which, through fighting, massacre or area bombardment, would bring death to 200,000 of them before the rising was over.