



# The Battle on the Kursk Salient

Boris SOLOVYOV

The Battle of Kursk  
decided the ultimate  
fate of Hitler's  
Reich

# 1943

Boris SOLOVYOV

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# The Battle on the Kursk Salient

(The Crushing of Operation Citadel)



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КУРСКАЯ БИТВА

на английском языке

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## FOREWORD

More than thirty years have passed since the Second World War. Honest eye-witness accounts of the events of those days are of the greatest value. The interest such accounts arouse in the West is even capable of suspending a strike. That is what happened in 1974 when several thousand French TV staff decided to resume work only in order to transmit a discussion of the Battle of Kursk with the participation of Soviet and other competent experts.

Thirty-five years have passed since the Battle of Kursk. The scars of the war have long been healed. The old Russian and Ukrainian cities of Kursk, Oryol, Belgorod and Kharkov which suffered severely from the Nazi invasion have been rebuilt. The fields that were the scene of great battles are growing wheat. But memorials to the Soviet soldiers who fought for victory remind people of those past days. Many of the firing and communication trenches and dugouts have been preserved as unique monuments. The truth about the heroism of the Soviet officers and men who fought a hard war for 1,418 days to win victory over the Nazi invaders is still alive in people's memories.

The Battle of Kursk which lasted for a total of 50 days, from July 5 to August 23, 1943, and which crushed the ambitious Nazi plans for a sweeping strategic offensive under the code name of Operation Citadel, was one of the most gigantic military clashes in the history of mankind. Each side sent into action armies more than a million strong. In

no other battle of the Second World War were so many tanks, guns, mortars and aircraft engaged.

After the defeats the Wehrmacht had suffered at Moscow and Stalingrad the Hitler clique decided to give battle that summer in a general engagement in the region of Kursk which, it hoped, would turn the tide of the war on the Soviet-German front in favour of Nazi Germany and would lead to the defeat of the USSR in the war.

Hitler's General Headquarters based their plans for Operation Citadel on the particular situation that had arisen at Kursk as a result of the battles fought in the Oryol-Kursk-Belgorod-Kharkov region in the winter of 1942-1943. The frontline there followed a curve which became known in history as the Kursk Bulge or the Kursk Salient, a huge area of 65,000 square kilometres that was being held by Soviet troops. Both to the North and to the South of it there were two wedges—the Oryol-Kursk and Belgorod-Kharkov wedges—held by the Nazi forces. The Wehrmacht generals were eager to take advantage of this situation and to launch two pincer attacks at the base of the salient, exploiting the element of surprise to the full. In their plans they already saw the Soviet armies surrounded and destroyed and the Wehrmacht, breaking through into open country, victoriously advancing on Moscow and Leningrad. Such was the general intention of Operation Citadel.

The Nazi command made careful preparations for the operation. The entire industrial potential of Nazi Germany and its allies was geared to equipping the Wehrmacht and preparing for the forthcoming Battle of Kursk, which Hitler called the decisive campaign of the year. Not only the best equipment but also the most efficient panzer, motorised and infantry divisions were concentrated

there. More than one-third of all the Nazi divisions on the Soviet-German front were committed to action in Operation Citadel.

But the situation in the summer of 1943 greatly differed from that in 1941 and 1942. In the summer of 1943, after the defeats the Wehrmacht had suffered at the hands of the Red Army at Moscow, at Stalingrad and in the Caucasus, the Hitlerites were no longer in a position to conduct an offensive along the entire front. They now wished to launch a main attack in one direction.

The Soviet Supreme Command clearly realised that the main military developments in the summer of 1943 would be in the area of the Kursk Salient. So it countered the intentions of the enemy with a plan of its own.

The book describes the course of the battle on the Kursk Salient, which historians have called "the Waterloo of German fascism", and the outcome of the battle and its impact on the entire course of the Second World War.

## INTRODUCTION

The annals of the Second World War were written in blood and fire. The aggressors—Nazi Germany and its allies—lost the war. A war is lost through lost battles. Big and little battles were fought in the war. The fate of a big war—and the Second World War lasted not one, two or three but six long years—could be decided only in big battles.

There have been many instances in history when one big battle or, to use the military term, operation sealed the fate of a whole country. At the beginning of the Second World War Hitler's Wehrmacht overran whole countries without waging big battles. Let us recall only a few landmarks in the victorious march of the Nazi hordes across Western Europe.

September 1, 1939, was the official date of the outbreak of the Second World War, when the armies of Hitler's Third Reich invaded Poland. A month later the Nazis were celebrating victory. A period of "the phoney war" set in on the Western Front. Though Great Britain and France had been formally at war with Germany since September 3, they did not help Poland, the first victim of aggression. They remained passive and refrained from combat operations. At the same time they spared no pains to set Hitler against the Soviet Union, the world's first workers' and peasants' state.

In April 1940 Hitler seized Denmark and Norway. In May he invaded France, Belgium and the Netherlands. This marked the end of "the phoney war". In Western Europe there was no longer any

force capable of stemming the tide of the brown plague. It was claiming one victim after another. On June 22, 1940, France surrendered.

A year later the Nazis began to execute Operation Barbarossa. According to this plan the Soviet Armed Forces were to be routed in a period of from six to eight weeks and the USSR was to be destroyed. By that time, in addition to Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium and France, the peoples of Yugoslavia, Greece and Cyprus had fallen victim to Nazi aggression. The vast resources of the enslaved countries were placed at the service of the Nazi war machine which had now been "broken in" and tested in the course of two years of successful campaigns in Europe.

Counting on a rapid and decisive victory in their war against the Soviet Union, the Hitlerites hoped to proceed to take over Egypt, the Suez Canal, Iran, Iraq and India as early as in the autumn of 1941. They planned to seize the Strait of Gibraltar, to cut Great Britain off from its sources of raw materials and then to invade the British Isles.

Thus a matter of worldwide gravity was being decided through war. If the Soviet Union held out, the forces of progress in the world would triumph. But if the Nazis managed to gain the upper hand, mankind would be hurled into the abyss of barbarism.

At dawn on June 22, 1941, Nazi Germany treacherously launched a surprise attack on the USSR. This marked the beginning of the Great Patriotic War of the Soviet people against Nazi Germany, for their freedom and for the freedom and happiness of other peoples too. When the Nazis began the war, they counted on the weakness of the Soviet rear and of the Red Army. Basing their calculations

on the anti-Soviet stand of Great Britain, France and the USA, they hoped the Soviet Union would be completely isolated in international relations. They assumed that once the Soviet forces stationed along the Western frontier were destroyed the USSR would be torn by class strife and conflicts between nations and nationalities which would hasten the abolition of the Soviet system and the collapse of the Soviet state.

Hitler mustered an army nearly five million strong on the Eastern Front. It was the mightiest army of the capitalist world at that time. The Soviet people knew the bitterness of setbacks and defeat, especially in the early months of the war which were the most difficult ones. In 1941 the enemy managed to force his way deep into the USSR, to draw close to Leningrad and Moscow and then to reach the Volga and the foothills of the Caucasus.

In fierce defensive battles fought from the very first day of the Nazi invasion the Soviet forces destroyed and wore out regiments and divisions of a strong and ruthless enemy, who had acquired two years' experience in modern warfare. They inflicted irreparable losses on him. The defenders of Soviet cities and towns, of many inhabited localities, large and small, of unnamed heights, of crossings and railway junctions fought heroically to the last man. Their courage and valour were demonstrated in the defence of Brest, Kiev, Odessa, Leningrad, Sevastopol, Moscow and Tula.

Even when the enemy occupied some territory, the resistance did not cease. By the end of 1941, for instance, over 3,500 guerrilla detachments were conducting combat operations in enemy-held territory. In 1942 there were even more of these detachments. They set up liberated zones in the enemy

rear with Soviet administrative bodies, commonly known as "forest republics".

The crucial event of the first year of the war was the historic Battle of Moscow. It was a mighty battle fought over a vast area for a period of many months. Its outcome affected the course of the entire war. In it the main bodies of the Soviet and Nazi German armies came to grips with one another. In the winter of 1941-1942 the enemy was routed in bitter, bloody and relentless fighting. He was halted and driven back 100-250 kilometres westward from Moscow. The Nazis were forced to go over to the defensive along virtually the entire Soviet-German front. It was at Moscow that Nazi Germany suffered its first major defeat in the Second World War. Hitler's adventurist blitzkrieg plans flopped and this was an event of outstanding military and political significance. The myth of the invincibility of Nazi Germany's army, which had arisen during its triumphant march through the countries of Western Europe, was destroyed.

The Soviet victory at Moscow marked the beginning of the turn in the tide of the war and had an immense influence on its entire course. The Hitler clique now faced the prospect of a prolonged war which carried the risk of the collapse of all their plans of conquest. But complete victory over fascism was still a long way off.

The Battle of Kursk played an exceptional role in the crushing of Hitler Germany. It will be recounted in detail below. Anticipating the end of the story, the present author would like to quote an appraisal of the battle by Martin Caidin, an American historian. Referring to the catastrophe of inconceivable proportions which had befallen the Wehrmacht at Kursk he noted that the Red Army broke the back of well over a hundred Nazi divi-

sions. Indicating his disagreement with defeated Hitler generals who deny this fact, Martin Caidin remarked not without sarcasm that they preferred to describe their brilliant rearguard actions, while failing to admit that such actions denoted not victory but defeat. Summing up the importance of the Battle of Kursk he pointed out that, when the last round had been fired, the initiative in the war had passed to the Russian army, for it was the Russian army that now dictated when, where and how the war would be fought.

## Chapter One

### EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT

While we were trying to eliminate the enemy's bridgehead at Oryol, the Hitler command, as we were to learn later, had hatched a plan to nip the Kursk Bulge held by Soviet troops. That was why the Nazi command was massing more and more troops on the Northern and Southern flanks of the front, that is to say, in the vicinity of Oryol and Belgorod.

*(Excerpt from the memoirs of Marshal of the Soviet Union Ivan Bagramyan "Our Road to Victory")*

"I well remember the spring of 1943," Marshal of the Soviet Union Ivan Bagramyan wrote in his book of war memoirs *Our Road to Victory*. "It came early that year. Within a few days the roads were impassable because the snow had melted turning them into bogs. It was precisely this, it seemed, that brought about a lull. Not only on our Western Front. We learnt from operations reports that such a lull, unusual in wartime (a relative lull, of course, because firing never ceased at the front), had set in along the entire front—from beyond the Arctic Circle down to Novorossiisk.

"This was all the more surprising because battles had raged throughout the past winter. We had dealt the enemy a crushing blow at Stalingrad. Our forces had routed and taken prisoner a German grouping 330,000 strong. Moreover, during the defensive period of the battle enemy losses had totalled 700,000 officers and men. This was followed by successful operations in the North Caucasus and



along the upper reaches of the Don, by the breaking of the blockade of Leningrad and the elimination of the enemy bridgehead at Demyansk, West of Moscow. Soviet troops had entered the Donbas and the South-Eastern part of the Ukraine. To put it in a nutshell, the Nazi invaders were being driven from Soviet territory on a mass scale. Stunned by the catastrophe at Stalingrad, the Nazi command was feverishly mustering forces to stem the Soviet onslaught. The Germans launched a counteroffensive against the Soviet South-Western and Voronezh Fronts. But they failed to turn this operational success into one of strategic importance and to break through to the region of Kursk.

"That spring everybody from marshal to private seemed to be studying the map with anxious curiosity. The frontline on it assumed the form of a fanciful curve. Starting from the Barents Sea West of Murmansk, it ran almost straight South to Veli-kiye Luki. From there it turned 45 degrees to the South-East, to Novosil to enclose Nazi-held Oryol. Further down it snaked westward to drop straight South from Sevsk to Sumy. From Sumy it curved eastward to enclose Belgorod, to form a right angle at Chuguyev and extend further to the South-East. There were thus deep wedges pointing in both directions. It logically followed that during the forthcoming summer campaign decisive events would occur precisely in these wedges. Not only because these wedges and zigzags in the frontline facilitated attacks from the flanks, but also because they 'embraced' strategically important areas with well-developed road systems in which the combatants had concentrated their biggest and most efficient groupings. Success on these sectors of the front opened up very broad prospects for the victor.

"When I visited units and formations, I heard heated disputes over the maps dotted with flags. The troops were eager to fight. Every soldier was considering which areas offered the best prospects for attack. Now if strategists at company and battalion level were analysing the possibilities of the Kursk and Belgorod bulges in such detail, you may rest assured that both the Soviet and German general staffs were intently studying these tempting salients. . .

"Later we learnt that the enemy had been making feverish preparations for the forthcoming summer campaign. The leaders of the Third Reich had also concentrated their attention on the curving frontline. Hitler's general staff officers regarded these bulges as bridgeheads for attacks that would avenge their defeats in winter. The arrows on the maps, converging from North and South, opened up delightful prospects. The Soviet forces holding the Kursk Bulge from inside would be, they imagined, surrounded and destroyed, the frontline would be straightened out to release manpower and materiel for a further thrust. The main point, however, was that this would end the threat of a new lunge by the Russians from the Kursk Bulge which extended far to the West."

## Chapter Two

### ON THE EVE OF FRESH BATTLES

Much later I was asked how we could have been so sure we would repulse the enemy. This assurance had rested on a firm basis. Our commanders had matured and acquired tremendous combat experience. Our men had learned to fight and to win. The country was providing us with large quantities of up-to-date arms and materiel. Important changes had taken place in troop organisation. Large artillery units (had appeared)... Our Air Force was stronger and equipped with the most modern aircraft. There was certainly no enemy force capable of overwhelming us now.

*(Excerpt from the memoirs of Marshal of the Soviet Union Konstantin Rokossovsky "A Soldier's Duty")*

In preparing for the summer campaign of 1943 the Nazi leaders were forced to resort to extraordinary measures. According to the German general staff in two years of the war from 1941 to 1943 the armed forces of Nazi Germany had lost 4,265,000 officers and men killed, missing, wounded or invalided out. Practically all these losses were sustained on the Soviet-German front.

The shortage of manpower could be met only by what was officially termed "total" mobilisation. All males of the Third Reich capable of bearing arms were being called up into the army. Emergency measures were taken to expand war production. Increased output was achieved by plundering the economic resources of the occupied countries

and by ruthless exploitation of the working people. All males unfit for military service were mobilised for forced labour in German industry, transport and on the land. Hundreds of thousands of people from the occupied countries were forcefully herded to Germany. By then their numbers exceeded seven million. Displaced persons were treated like slaves. Just like prisoners-of-war, they were engaged in forced labour they hated. The Germans were cruel to them and kept them on a hunger diet. Hundreds of thousands were worked to death.

By mobilising all its resources by the summer of 1943 Germany had managed to equip its forces on the Eastern front with the latest models of Tiger and Panther tanks, with Ferdinand assault guns, Focke-Wulf 190A fighters and Henschel 129 ground attack planes. The Nazi Reich realised that its fate heavily depended on the outcome of the forthcoming campaign. It was not by chance that the Hitler bloc amassed everything it could for the showdown, including 5,325,000 officers and men, 54,300 guns and mortars, 5,850 tanks and assault guns, and nearly 3,000 aircraft. This meant that 70 per cent of the infantry, 63 per cent of the panzer forces and 55 per cent of the Luftwaffe were concentrated on the Kursk Bulge.

What did the Soviet side have? By the end of June in the third year of the war the field army comprised 6,612,000 officers and men, 105,000 guns and mortars, 10,200 tanks and self-propelled guns and 10,250 aircraft. As regards the Kursk zone the overall balance of manpower and materiel by early July was as follows: manpower-1.4:1, guns and mortars-1.9:1, tanks and self-propelled guns (assault guns)-1.2:1 and aircraft-1:1, in favour of the Red Army.

This was a formidable force. But the balance as regards overall material resources was still unfavourable to the Soviet Union. In temporarily-occupied Soviet territory the enemy had destroyed 1,710 cities, towns and urban-type settlements and 70,000 villages, he had demolished or burnt down 32,000 factories and plants, plundered 98,000 collective farms, 1,876 state farms and 2,890 machine-and-tractor stations.<sup>1</sup> The USSR's direct material losses through enemy action amounted to 679,000 million roubles. These figures were obviously established after the war. They all referred to enemy-held territory.

With a large area in the European part of the USSR being in enemy hands the Soviet Union's war potential sharply declined. Late in 1941 its industrial output dropped to half the prewar level. But by the latter half of 1942 despite all odds Soviet war production had already reached the prewar level and continued to grow. The Nazis could not understand how the Soviet Union could resist Germany's increased war potential after having lost all its production facilities in the centre and the South. They thought the USSR could never catch up with Germany's output of tanks, aircraft, guns, mortars and ammunition. Though the USSR's steel production was only a quarter of Germany's, its output of tanks and self-propelled guns exceeded Germany's by five to two. Why? Because its social system and its organisation were different. Its viability was therefore much higher. The consequences of this were obvious. The Krupps, Flicks and other big monopolists could not compete with a socialist state

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<sup>1</sup> Machine-and-tractor stations were organised in the late 1920's. These were state associations to provide cooperative farms with the services of farm machines and tractors.

run by the people, because all the latter's wealth and means of production were owned by the whole of society. The people provided their army with all it needed to secure victory.

It should be mentioned that in 1941, before the Nazi German attack, the USSR, as today, produced only a fraction of the arms and other combat equipment it could turn out. In fact it produced just enough to secure its defences. When arms output had to be boosted millions of Soviet workers, technicians and engineers put their efforts into munitions production, often volunteering to work for months without ever leaving the factory shops, frequently eating and sleeping at their work benches, forgetting about fatigue and rest days. "Only people who sought to live up to their civic and patriotic duty, people who regarded their aim and purpose of life to be their labour contribution to their Homeland could work like that," said Leonid Brezhnev.

From July to November 1941 1,360 big factories and plants had in the face of tremendous difficulties to be evacuated from frontline areas to the East of the USSR so that they could start turning out arms and other military equipment for the front. The Nazis simply ignored the fact that the industries evacuated to the East from enemy-occupied regions in the South and the centre were already working and manufacturing the latest equipment. They thought the reports to this effect were sheer propaganda. In appraising the Soviet economic potential the Hitlerites failed to take account of such factors as love for the Homeland and Soviet patriotism. These factors were a source of inspiration to the people and helped to boost tenfold the strength of all those who worked in the rear under the slogan: "All for the front, all for

victory over the enemy!" The Nazi leaders certainly grossly miscalculated. This only served to show how right Lenin had been when he said that the reactionary classes made blunders in politics not because they lacked competent people "but because it is impossible to calculate properly when one is heading for destruction".<sup>1</sup>

Here are only a few reports on the life of the Soviet rear taken from a brief chronicle<sup>2</sup> of events just from April to June, 1943, that is to say, in the months preceding the Battle of Kursk. They are an eloquent description of the Soviet people and of the hard and tense life of a country which had nothing to spare. On the contrary, it was experiencing many shortages. Yet it is obvious from the chronicle that many unusual developments occurred.

*Wednesday, April 21*

The people of Azerbaijan published a letter to Azerbaijani soldiers. In it they reported to the front their achievements in labour and in collecting over 170 million roubles to build tanks and planes for the Red Army. The letter was signed by 897,146 people.

*Friday, May 7*

In the course of a single year the nationwide socialist emulation movement has helped to raise labour productivity in the aircraft engineering industry by over thirty per cent (compared with

<sup>1</sup> Lenin, *Coll. Works*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1966, Vol. 33, p. 154.

<sup>2</sup> See *The USSR in the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945 (Brief Chronicle)*, Moscow, 1970, pp. 395-421 (in Russian).

April 1942), in the munitions industry by 15 per cent, heavy engineering—11 per cent, the tank-building industry—38 per cent, electrical engineering—over 27 per cent, light industry—46 per cent, and the meat-packing and dairy industries—20 per cent.

In the latter half of 1942 ammunition factories received 24,000 proposals for rationalising and improving production techniques. The introduction of only one-third of these proposals helped to save 4,800 tons of ferrous metals and 3,400 tons of non-ferrous metals. In money terms the saving amounted to 259 million roubles.

*Wednesday, May 12*

A department at the Lenin works in Zlatoust has increased its output thirty times over, compared with the prewar level. During the war the steel-makers of Zlatoust mastered the production of 168 new brands of steel and increased the output of barrel steel more than seven times.

*Friday, June 18*

In two years the oilmen of Azerbaijan introduced 3,860 rationalisation proposals which yielded a saving of about 50 million roubles.

*Saturday, June 26*

Foundrymen at the Gorky works fulfilled their half-year programme by June 15, saving 2,442 tons of steel. In the last two months they saved 244 tons of solid fuel.

If collated, such reports would fill many volumes of an encyclopedia of the labour feats Soviet people

performed for victory. They worked to help secure a quick defeat of the enemy in the Battle of Kursk as well as in subsequent battles. They were eager to help gain this victory so that no more men would be killed in action, so that the boys employed at the factories would be able to return to their studies instead of working like adults, so that the Soviet people could set about building the advanced socialist society of today, whose Constitution guarantees the broadest human rights.

This should be mentioned, because the Second World War could have been prevented. If it had not been for the pernicious policy of "appeasement" of the Nazi aggressor and the policy of "non-intervention" that was pursued in the 1930s by the British, French and US governments, the war might not have broken out. Austria was annexed with their consent. The next on the list was Czechoslovakia. At their meeting in Munich Hitler, Mussolini, Chamberlain and Daladier on September 30, 1938, signed an agreement which sealed the fate of Czechoslovakia and encouraged the aggressor to unleash the Second World War.

The collusion of the imperialists was designed to give Hitler a free hand in the East. But this was not enough to gratify the aggressor. Though the governments of Chamberlain and Daladier only five days before the Nazi attack had guaranteed immediate aid and support to Poland, they in fact went no further than formally declaring war on Germany. One hundred and ten French and British divisions with only 23 German divisions facing them did virtually nothing at all. Why?

When the Wehrmacht overran Poland, Nazi Germany brought its armed forces to the Western frontiers of the USSR. This circumstance pleased the British and French governments more than anything

else. They gave to Poland the role of a mere pawn in their imperialist intrigues. They hoped that an attack on the Soviet Union would follow. They hoped that after the Nazi Wehrmacht had routed the Red Army and exhausted itself in the military campaign, Great Britain and France would be able to strike at Germany from the rear and crush it. But they grossly miscalculated. Eight months after the fall of Poland the Nazi army attacked France and overran it. Indeed, he who sows the wind will reap the whirlwind.

Before the war the Soviet Union did everything to prevent its outbreak and to ensure collective security. The Soviet government was eager to conclude an agreement that would help establish effective cooperation with Great Britain and France against aggression. But in the course of prolonged talks these countries tried to get the Soviet Union to accept unilateral obligations which would inevitably have drawn it into war with Germany, while Great Britain and France would avoid this. The talks led to an impasse and were stopped. Great Britain and France refused to join in a resolute struggle against Nazi aggression. Bourgeois Poland outspokenly rejected Soviet military assistance. War had now directly reached the Soviet frontiers not only from the West but also from the East, where the Japanese militarists were provoking a conflict. Such are the facts. The Soviet government was compelled to give its consent to starting negotiations with Germany. On August 23, 1939, a Soviet-German Non-Aggression Pact was signed in Moscow. In defiance of it Nazi Germany was treacherously to violate its terms on June 22, 1941. But the pact gave the USSR a respite of nearly two years to prepare itself for a showdown in single combat with the experienced Nazi army.

In the summer of 1943 the single combat between the USSR and Nazi Germany reached its height. The world military and political situation was still difficult. Fierce fighting was going on over vast expanses of land, on the high seas, underwater and in the air. Most of Europe was languishing under the iron heel of Nazi occupation. German submarines were playing havoc with shipping in the Atlantic. Japan was still holding vast territories in Asia and in the Pacific.

The Third Reich and its European allies concentrated the bulk of their forces on the Soviet-German front. The British and US governments still failed to live up to their pledge about opening a second front in Europe.

In appraising the situation which had taken shape by the summer of 1943 in connection with the postponement of the Anglo-American invasion of Western Europe until the spring of 1944, Joseph Stalin wrote to Franklin D. Roosevelt:

"Your decision creates exceptional difficulties for the Soviet Union which, straining all its resources, for the past two years has been engaged against the main forces of Germany and her satellites, and leaves the Soviet Army, which is fighting not only for its country, but also for its Allies, to do the job alone, almost single-handed, against an enemy that is still very strong and formidable."<sup>1</sup>

At the time Germany and its allies still had a powerful war machine which enabled them to conduct an unremitting struggle for a long time to come. They continued to retain control over the oc-

cupied countries of Europe and Asia and had vast resources. The rulers of Nazi Germany were eager to avenge their defeat at Stalingrad and to regain the strategic initiative. But just like in 1941 they were gamblers who overestimated their own forces and underestimated the potentialities of the Soviet Union. This was evident from the plans of the Hitler leaders for the summer campaign of 1943 and from their futile attempts to realise them.

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<sup>1</sup> *Correspondence Between the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR and the President of the USA and the Prime Minister of Great Britain During the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945*, Vol. II, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1957, p. 70.

## Chapter Three

### TWO PLANS, TWO STRATEGIES

I consider it inexpedient for our troops to launch an offensive within the next few days with the purpose of forestalling the enemy. It would be better if we wore him down with our defence, knocked out his tanks and then, bringing in fresh forces, passed over to a general offensive and smashed his main forces.

*(Excerpt from the memoirs of Marshal of the Soviet Union Georgi Zhukov "Recollections and Reflections")*

To close the embrasure of an enemy gun emplacement with your own body when you have no other means of silencing an enemy machine gun and thus saving the lives of your comrades in the attack, as Private S. A. Kukunin did; to engage twenty enemy aircraft alone, shoot down nine and sacrifice your life in unequal combat, as Lieutenant A. K. Gorovets did; to destroy 19 tanks and die fighting, as all the men of Captain G. I. Igishev's battery did—to do this called for unexampled courage and staunchness. In the battles fought at Kursk Soviet soldiers exhibited these qualities in full measure. Suffice it to say that 132 formations and units were made guards units, 26 formations and units were honoured with new names in commemoration of the battles they won, and over 100,000 officers and men were awarded orders and medals, 180 of them being honoured with the title of Hero of the Soviet Union. In referring to the role of the ideological factor in war Lenin wrote:

"In the final analysis, victory in any war depends on the spirit animating the masses that spill their own blood on the field of battle. The conviction that the war is in a just cause and the realisation that their lives must be laid down for the welfare of their brothers strengthen the morale of the fighting men and enable them to endure incredible hardships. . .

"The realisation by the masses of the causes and aims of the war is of tremendous importance and ensures victory."

The men of the Red Army exhibited courage and valour in the Battle of Kursk from beginning to end. It was to be a struggle of unprecedented ferocity and intensity. The Soviet troops holding the Kursk Bulge were hemmed in by the enemy on the North, West, and South. They realised that if the bulge defences were pierced at the base, they would be completely encircled.

The Hitlerites believed that the bulging of the frontline at Kursk far to the West presented a favourable opportunity to encircle and destroy the very powerful Soviet grouping that was holding it. A victory would restore the Wehrmacht's battered prestige among its allies and fortify the morale of the German people and army. That was why the Hitler clique attached special importance to Operation Citadel since, as the appeal addressed to the men of the Nazi army and signed by Hitler put it, everything might depend upon the outcome of the battle.

The Nazi command gave the German troops an ambitious mission, namely to launch massive attacks from areas near Belgorod and South of Oryol, attacks of mounting strength with a view to executing a converging offensive that would result in the encirclement and destruction of the forces of

the Soviet Central and Voronezh Fronts and of the strategic reserves. The Nazi command pinned its hopes on the effectiveness of massive surprise attacks by panzer formations on the narrow sectors of the front chosen for the breakthrough. Preparations were made with great thoroughness and in deep secrecy. But the date of the attack was postponed several times. The Hitlerites were doing their best to include the maximum number of heavy tanks and assault guns and other combat equipment in the assault groups.

The operation was to be carried out by 50 full-strength divisions, including 16 panzer and motorised divisions, by about 10,000 guns and mortars, up to 2,700 tanks and assault guns and over 2,000 aircraft. The best formations, the best weapons and best commanders were concentrated at the base of the Kursk Bulge. The Nazi forces were abundantly supplied with ammunition. All the available manpower resources and all the industrial potential that Hitler Germany and the occupied countries could provide were assembled to form a fist in the area of the planned attacks. Later General Erfurth, former officer of the German High Command General Headquarters, wrote that the entire attack potential the German army was capable of mustering was committed to action in Operation Citadel.

Following a successful attack on Kursk it was intended to strike a blow at the rear of the Soviet South-Western Front, to destroy its manpower and advance far to the East, thus completing Operation Panther. These operations were to bring about a radical change in the military and political situation and to open up new prospects for the Wehrmacht. In particular the Nazi command contemplated advancing in a North-Easterly direction so that

German forces would appear in the deep rear of the Soviet central grouping and would threaten Moscow with encirclement.

The enemy also believed that the successful accomplishment of Operation Citadel would enable him to shift a part of his forces to the region of Leningrad in order to reach the Volkhov River, capture Leningrad, rout the Soviet forces fighting there and destroy the Soviet Baltic Fleet. Hitler's appeal to the German soldiers showed that he and his generals were staking all on the battle at Kursk, because its outcome was finally to decide the fate of the Third Reich.

The Soviet command attached tremendous importance to the forthcoming battle. Soviet military leaders saw clearly that Hitler's general staff intended to "eliminate" the Kursk Bulge. The question was what should be done to foil the plans of the enemy.

Late in March, as soon as the winter campaign was completed, the Soviet command started working on its war plans for the summer and autumn of 1943. The work was conducted in several stages. The initial proposal was for a large-scale offensive thrusting in a South-Westerly direction. But when Soviet intelligence reports revealed the enemy's intentions to a fuller degree and determined the composition of his attack groupings and the direction of his intended thrusts, the Soviet command decided to take deliberate defence measures. Since the strategic initiative was in the hands of the Soviet forces after Stalingrad, they were in a position to adopt any form of action they thought best.

For three months the Soviet side made energetic preparations to beat off the massive attacks of the enemy. Serious attention was paid to organising a solid deeply-echeloned defence system with elabo-



rate engineering works. Special efforts were made to build up an effective antitank defence. Troops were instructed to lay dense minefields and barbed wire entanglements on the approaches to the main line of resistance, to conceal men, guns and tanks in trenches and dugouts connected by a system of communicating trenches.

During this period a total of eight defence lines with an overall depth of 300 kilometres were built. The liberated population of the Oryol, Kursk, Voronezh and Kharkov regions made a big contribution to the building of these lines. The length of the trenches dug by the local population, for instance, was seven times greater than the distance from Paris to Toulon or equal to the distance from San Francisco to Washington to Montreal.

The intention was in the course of defensive battles to bleed white the enemy's striking panzer formations, to halt them within the tactical zone and to create favourable conditions for going over to the counteroffensive. There was also an alternative plan. If the enemy were to give up or delay the attack indefinitely, the Soviet side was to undertake offensive action itself. The sequel showed that the Soviet plans were sound.

To beat off the Wehrmacht attack from Oryol on the Northern flank of the Bulge was the task of the Central Front, and to beat the attack from Belgorod on the Southern flank was the task of the Voronezh Front. When the task of defence had been fulfilled the Soviet forces were to undertake a previously planned offensive to drive the enemy back in the Oryol and Belgorod-Kharkov directions.

The Supreme Command General Headquarters assigned an important role in the battles to its powerful strategic reserve—the Steppe Military Area. Its

forces were to prevent the penetration of enemy troops from the direction both of Oryol and of Belgorod. During the switchover to the counter-offensive they were to increase the strength of the attack from the depth of the rear.

While the Wehrmacht groupings were being routed in the zone of the Kursk Bulge it was planned to launch a general offensive in a South-Westerly and Westerly direction to destroy the main forces of the South and Centre Groups of the Nazi armies. The ultimate aim was to smash the Nazi German defence system on a vast front extending nearly two thousand kilometres from Velikiye Luki to the Black Sea, to liberate vital economic regions of the Ukraine on the left bank of the Dnieper, to cross the strategic line of the Dnieper and to push the battlefield even further from Moscow.

The plans outlined by the Communist Party's Central Committee, the Soviet Government, the State Defence Committee and the Supreme Command were being firmly and consistently implemented. Operations on the fronts were coordinated by Marshals Zhukov and Vasilevsky, representatives of the Supreme Command General Headquarters. By the time the Germans went over to the offensive the Supreme Command General Headquarters had massed in the Kursk Bulge in the zones of the Central and Voronezh Fronts about one-third of the manpower and combat aircraft, up to half the tanks and self-propelled guns and over a quarter of the guns and mortars of the field army (including the strategic reserves). The Soviet side thus had some superiority over the enemy in forces.

As the troops were preparing for the Battle of Kursk thousands of officers and men joined the Communist Party. From April 1943 to early July 1943 the number of Communists in the forces ope-

rating in the region of the Kursk Bulge increased by 26 per cent and the number of Komsomol (Young Communist League) members by 54 per cent. Party and Komsomol members constituted 36 per cent of all personnel. Party organisations gave reliable support to commanders. Communists set an example to non-Party people in combat training, in the handling of weapons and in building ground works for defence. They shared with others the experience they had acquired in earlier battles and introduced the younger men to the glorious combat traditions of their units and detachments.

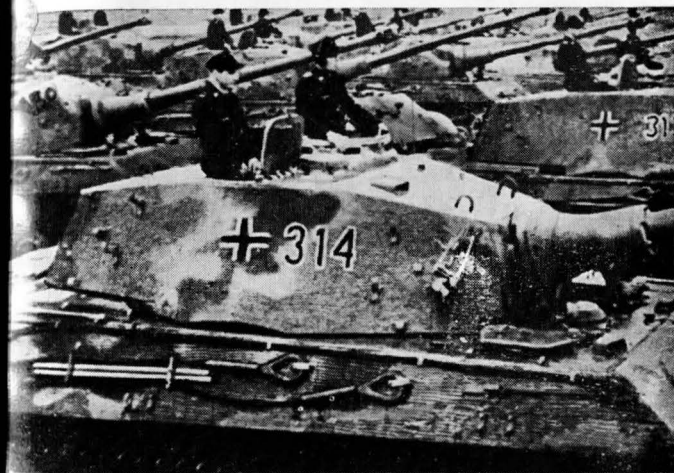
All the officers and men were imbued with a desire to win the coming battle. Colonel Pyotr Gudz, Hero of the Soviet Union, who commanded the 8th Infantry Division, says that in every regiment he visited he saw smiling faces and eyes confident of success in the war.

"In a dense green grove I saw wounded men resting," he wrote in his memoirs. "The commander of the medical battalion complained that they were giving him a lot of trouble. As soon as their wounds were dressed after a few days' rest they would 'desert' to their regular units. Even the severely wounded pleaded not to be evacuated to army hospitals. They wanted to get better in the battalion.

"Only men convinced of the rightness of the cause they were fighting for could be so eager to join in the struggle themselves."



Moscow fires its first artillery salute of the war in honour of the Red Army soldiers who liberated Oryol and Belgorod during the Battle of Kursk. It was a hard-won victory.



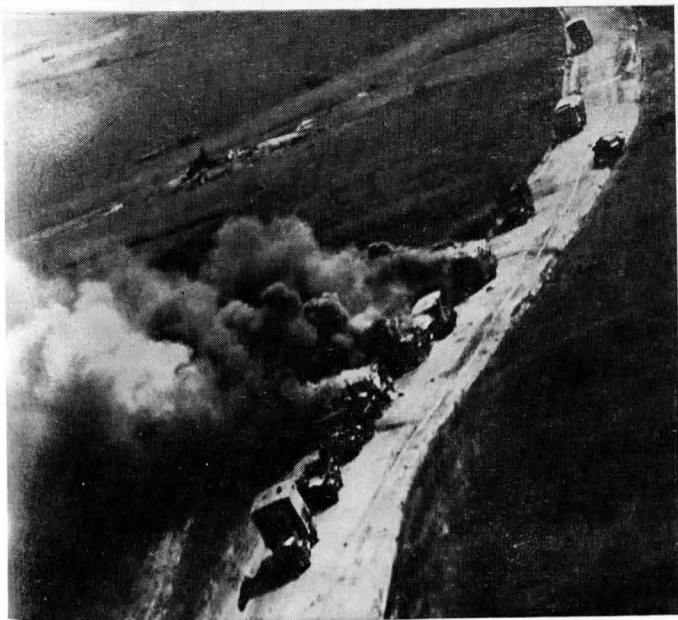
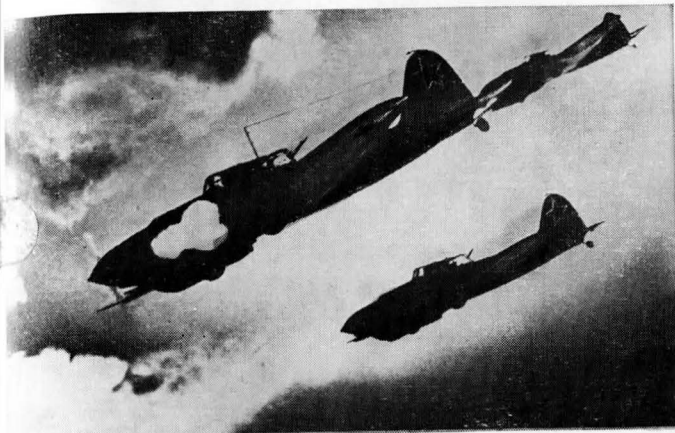
On the Kursk Bulge the Nazi High Command had concentrated 75 per cent of all its panzer formations on the Eastern Front.



**A Tiger tank in flames.**

**Soviet Il-2 attack planes, attacking an enemy column of motor vehicles.**

**The pilots have scored direct hits on the target.**



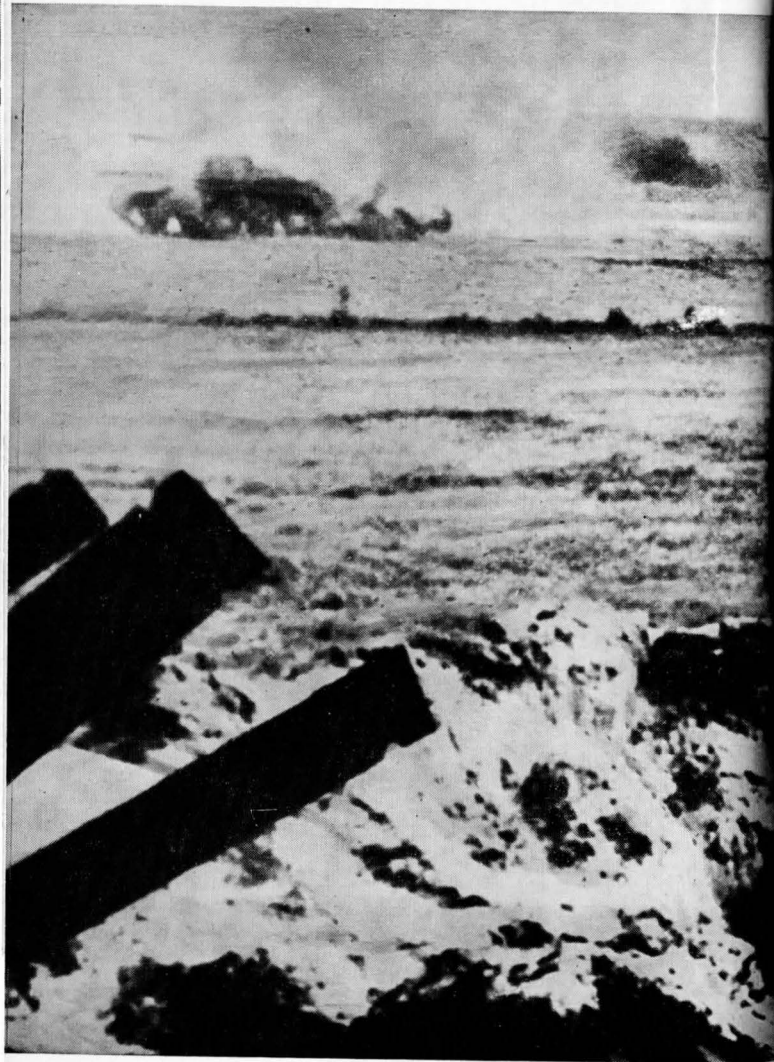


Soviet T-34 tanks going into the attack.

Artillery in action.

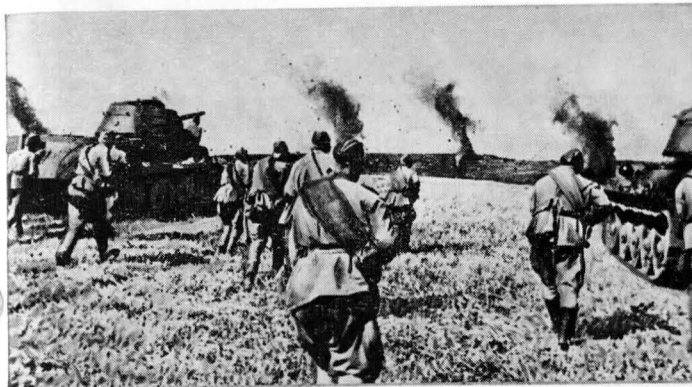


Soviet heavy tanks at Prokhorovka.





Soviet antitank riflemen, tanks and infantry attacking enemy positions.



Soviet troops liberate Kharkov.

Aftermath.







**Soviet armymen who won the  
Battle of Kursk.**



Young Pioneers of Belgorod lay a wreath on a memorial to tankmen who routed the Nazi aggressors on the Kursk Bulge in 1943.

## Chapter Four

### A STORM GATHERS OVER OPERATION CITADEL

In a few hours hundreds of tanks were turned into scrap. The earth groaned from exploding shells and bombs and from the roar of the tanks. There were several hundred aircraft overhead all the time. Fierce air battles were being fought. The clouds of black dust raised by the tanks, bursting shells and bombs, and the black smoke rising from the burning tanks and vehicles turned the soil and sky a grim grey colour. The horizon disappeared. The sun too was dimmed. Its red disk could hardly be seen through the murk.

*(Excerpt from the memoirs of Chief Marshal of the Armoured Forces Amazasp Babadzanyan "We Opened the Hatches in Berlin. Combat Record of the First Guards Tank Army")*

At 2.30 a.m. on July 5, 1943, the Nazi German troops concentrated in the assembly areas for the assault North and South of Kursk were struck by a terrific squall of artillery fire. Having learned the date and hour of the enemy operation the Soviet command conducted an artillery and air counter-preparation by shelling and bombing the enemy poised for the attack—his batteries, observation posts and staffs, his troop concentration areas and airfields. The enemy sustained considerable losses. He was forced to delay his attack for two-and-a-half to three hours. The Hitlerites failed to secure the element of surprise.

From the outset the battle was marked by the tremendous scale and extreme intensity of operations. The enemy attacked with large forces of infantry and armour which endeavoured by panzer thrusts on narrow sectors of the front to break through to Kursk. Fierce fighting raged both on land and in the air.

The Ninth German Army under Colonel-General Model attacked on the Northern flank of the Kursk Bulge along a front of 45 kilometres. The Nazi troops launched one assault after another on the positions of the Soviet Central Front under General of the Army Konstantin Rokossovsky. The main attack forces of the enemy numbering 460,000 officers and men with about 6,000 guns and mortars and up to 1,200 tanks and assault guns were to strike at Kursk from the region of Oryol. In the direction of his main drive the enemy threw into action simultaneously over 500 tanks, including more than 100 heavy Tiger tanks, which led the attacking echelon in groups of from 10 to 15 supported by Ferdinand assault guns. These were followed by medium tanks and infantry in armoured personnel carriers. Large formations of Nazi bombers flew overhead in successive waves. Their job was to pave the way for the panzer units.

The men of the Thirteenth Soviet Army met the enemy with heavy fire from their artillery and anti-tank rifles, hand grenades and incendiary bottles. Many tanks were destroyed in the mine fields protecting the Soviet positions. The enemy infantry suffered heavy losses from small arms fire, from gun and mortar fire. The Soviet aircraft vigorously beat off the massive enemy air attacks. At the same time Soviet planes struck effectively at the attacking units, at their nearest reserves and the nearest airfields.

Both sides sustained losses. On the battlefield fire and steel struck heavy blows in every direction. The Hitlerites threw ever more forces into action and there was no easing of the pressure. Following his fifth assault on July 5 the enemy managed to force his way into the forward defence line of the Thirteenth Soviet Army and to drive some of its units back to a distance of from six to eight kilometres. But this was not enough to secure success.

In parrying the Hitlerite thrusts Soviet troops displayed their firm resolve to hold out and defeat the enemy. In all cases the Soviet infantry, tank, artillery and mortar crews and airmen displayed outstanding courage, gallantry and real heroism.

"They conquered death by death," says Nikolai Boiko, Hero of the Soviet Union, who commanded an artillery battery in the Battle of Kursk.

"On the first day of the battle the attacks of the Hitlerites did not achieve any outstanding success although, enjoying numerical superiority, they managed to make some headway in particular sectors. Nor did they make any essential progress on the following day—July 6—either. Not because the enemy pressure relaxed. No, the enemy pressed ahead with incredible stubbornness. But his divisions met the even greater stubbornness of our Soviet divisions, came up against the mass heroism, fearlessness and unparalleled staying power of our men. Here is an example. Six Nazi tanks headed for Mikhail Vedyakin's gun positioned at the village of Snova. The gunner waited for the first tank to draw closer. At a distance of two hundred metres Guards Sergeant Vedyakin fired. The first round stopped the tank. The next three rounds stopped another and the following rounds stopped two more tanks. The other tanks began to withdraw. But at that moment an enemy shell destroyed the gun and

hit the brave gunner. But the enemy did not pass because the crews of other gun batteries fought no less bravely."

On July 6 Guards Lieutenant Aleksei Gorovets, a pilot, performed an immortal feat. Facing a large group of twenty enemy planes alone he boldly decided to attack them. On the first run he shot down the leader. By the time the enemy aircraft began to disperse he had shot down six, and then he got a further two. In the excitement of the battle he failed to notice four enemy fighters approaching him from above. It was an unequal battle and Gorovets was himself shot down. This brave fighter pilot was the only pilot in the world to shoot down nine enemy planes in a single engagement. He was posthumously honoured with the title of Hero of the Soviet Union.

On the evening of July 5 General Rokossovsky, Commander-in-Chief of the Central Front, who had won fame in the battles at Moscow and Stalingrad, decided to deliver a counterblow at the enemy's main attack force the following morning to weaken the enemy's pressure. The counterattack was organised and executed under exceptionally difficult conditions, in an extremely short period of time, on heavily mined ground and under harassment from the Luftwaffe. Only after two hours of fierce fighting on July 6 did Soviet troops manage to push back the enemy from one-and-a-half to two kilometres northward.

On July 7 and 8 the enemy threw into action virtually the entire main attack force operating on the Northern flank of the Kursk Bulge. But all his attempts to break through the Soviet defences proved futile. The crippling losses of the attacking formations sapped their strength. On July 9 the Hitlerite command was compelled to halt the offen-

sive in order to regroup its forces for a fresh attack. The attack was renewed on July 10. But neither on July 10 nor July 11 did the enemy manage to wedge his way into the defences of the Central Front.

The fighting was extremely strenuous on the Southern flank of the Kursk Bulge too, that is to say, in the defence zone of the Voronezh Front under General of the Army Nikolai F. Vatutin. On the very first day of the attack the enemy threw into action five infantry and eight panzer divisions and one motorised division. They were supported by powerful Luftwaffe forces. The Second and Fourth Panzer Armies and the Kempf Operational Group totalled 440,000 officers and men, over 4,000 guns and mortars and over 1,800 tanks and assault guns. The Fourth Panzer Army and the Kempf Operational Group belonged to Armies Group South headed by General Field Marshal Erich von Manstein. The Nazis launched their main attack along the main road towards Oboyan and Kursk. The enemy also launched a secondary attack in the direction of Korocha.

On July 5 the enemy was unable to effect a breakthrough in either of these directions. He only drove a wedge into the Soviet defences to a depth of eight kilometres. Soviet forces displayed prowess and staunchness in defensive combat. The infantrymen, gunners, tank crews, combat engineers and signalmen displayed mass heroism and valour. Guards Junior Lieutenant Derevyanko, a member of the Komsomol, won immortal glory. His antitank gun platoon made contact with the enemy East of Belgorod. Fifteen enemy tanks headed for their position. In a brief period of time Derevyanko personally scored direct hits on three Tiger tanks. A few minutes later 12 Nazi tanks turned on his gun.

He disabled another tank with an accurate shot. This was the last round he fired because the next moment he died under the tracks of a Nazi tank. Soon Derevyanko's platoon received support from another detachment and the Soviet soldiers managed to hold their own. The enemy did not pass. The brave artilleryman was posthumously awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union.

Colonel Molkanov, now a reserve officer, who fought in the Battle of Kursk, recalls:

"The staunchness of Soviet soldiers repeatedly helped them to gain the upper hand over German weaponry. At noon on July 8 a big Nazi force of at least 200 tanks, having crushed regiments of the 132nd Infantry Division, rushed into the resultant gap against the 3rd Antitank Brigade and the 105th Transbaikal Frontier Guards Division. A very bitter battle followed. . . The gunners fired pointblank at the attacking tanks. The antitank riflemen, anti-tank rocket launcher crews and blasters allowed the enemy tanks to approach to pointblank range. Against the steel column stood the staunchness of Soviet soldiers. . . Not a single tank passed the line. I came to the sector as the battle was drawing to a close. Over a vast area as far as the eye could see I saw the Nazi tanks, which had just been threatening our men with death, smouldering on the battlefield. The enemy also failed in his attempt to deal a heavy blow on the morning of July 9."

Soviet airmen were fighting grim battles with the Luftwaffe over the Southern flank of the Kursk Bulge. It was here that Ivan Kozhedub, the famous pilot who was thrice honoured with the title of Hero of the Soviet Union by the end of the war, began his service record. He shot down a Junkers-87 bomber on July 6 and another one on July 7. The following day he destroyed two Messerschmitt-109

fighters. The intensity of the air battles is shown by the following figures: over 2,000 aircraft were in action in an area measuring 20 kilometres by 60 kilometres. Quite often from 100 to 150 aircraft were simultaneously engaged in battles over this area.

Two days' fighting on the Southern flank of the Kursk Bulge brought no success to Armies Group South. The Nazi troops managed to advance from 10 to 18 kilometres in the direction of Oboyan. In the Korocha sector they seized a bridgehead on the Eastern bank of the Northern Donets River. At that moment the command of the Fourth Panzer Army and the Kempf Operational Group threw fresh forces into action. The Nazi army corps launched further attacks in an effort to pierce the second Soviet defence zone. The intensity of the fighting on the Southern flank of the Kursk Bulge sharply increased.

The enemy stubbornly strove to win. The Anglo-American landing in Sicily at the time did not affect the plans of the Nazi command to any extent. On July 10 Hitler's General Staff Headquarters issued an order to continue Operation Citadel.

Meeting insurmountable resistance in the Oboyan sector the Fourth Panzer Army and the Kempf Operational Group turned their main drive to the village of Prokhorovka, hoping to reach Kursk by a roundabout route. But here, too, the attackers could not wear down the resistance of the Soviet troops either on July 10 or 11.

On July 11 General Field Marshal von Manstein, Commander-in-Chief of Armies Group South, thought of making coordinated thrusts by two panzer groups on the following day, which would enable him to encircle and destroy Soviet troops, to breach the front and force his way to Kursk from the East.

Von Kluge, Commander-in-Chief of Armies Group Centre, intended to resume the offensive from the North towards Kursk.

Meanwhile events were approaching which were radically to change the nature of the struggle. On orders from the Soviet Supreme Command General Headquarters the Soviet side was completing its preparations for a counteroffensive. The Soviet forces, not yet involved in action on the Kursk Bulge, were to go over to the offensive. Their thrusts were aimed at the rear of the Nazi troops making frantic efforts to fight their way to Kursk from the North.

The Soviet command correctly assessed the imminent crisis of the German offensive. The Soviet Supreme Command General Headquarters ordered the troops on the left flank of the Western Front and the forces of the Bryansk Front to assume the offensive on the morning of July 12 with a view to smashing the Oryol grouping of the enemy. At the same time the forces of the Voronezh Front reinforced with strategic reserves were to deliver a powerful counterblow to smash the Hitlerite forces at Prokhorovka. The Fifth Guards Tank Army under General Pavel Rotmistrov and the Fifth Guards Army under General Alexei Zhadov were to play the principal role in this operation. Both these armies had been brought into action from the General Headquarters Reserve.

On July 12 the Second World War's biggest tank battle was fought near Prokhorovka. A total of up to 1,200 Soviet and German tanks and self-propelled guns came to grips in an extremely ferocious battle embracing a wide variety of forms of combat.

Describing this unprecedented tank engagement, Pavel Rotmistrov, now Chief Marshal of the Ar-

moured Forces, recalls that the forward tank echelon of his guards army with air support drove at full speed into the attack formations of the Nazi forces. The formations of both sides were now mixed up. At close quarters the Tiger tanks could not utilise the advantages of their armament and were effectively dealt with at close range by the Soviet T-34 medium tanks. The appearance of so many Soviet tanks came as a complete surprise to the enemy.

"Till late in the evening the endless roar of engines and rumble of tank tracks hung over the battlefield," Marshal Rotmistrov writes in his memoirs. "Shells were bursting all around. Hundreds of tanks and self-propelled guns were in flames. Clouds of dust and smoke blotted out the sky. The enemy had not expected to meet the Fifth Guards Tank Army in the Prokhorovka sector... Yes, July 12, 1943, was destined to become a historic date. On that day Soviet soldiers performed an unparalleled feat. In a ferocious tank engagement they bled the main Nazi attack force white and forced it to go over to the defensive."

In the battle fought at Prokhorovka the Nazis lost nearly 400 tanks and sustained heavy losses in manpower. West German historian Walter Görlitz wrote of it: "The last units capable of offensive operations burned down to a cinder. The backbone of the German armoured forces was broken."

July 12 witnessed the collapse of the Wehrmacht's attack on Kursk from the South. Subsequent Nazi attempts to continue the offensive were only of local significance. Having failed to accomplish their mission the forces of Armies Group South started to retreat. The Soviet forces pursued them. By the end of the day on July 23 they reached the positions

they had occupied before the German offensive began.

To win the defensive battle it was not enough to display mass courage and staunchness. One also had to organise a deep defence system with elaborate engineering works. All this along with the availability of adequate reserves, weapons and materiel were factors of great importance. But they alone would not necessarily have secured victory without competent leadership of the troops, without reliable intelligence reports, without a knowledge of enemy strategy and tactics.

The Soviet command managed to learn the time and direction of the enemy attacks and to build up adequate defences against them, to oppose force by force. Figuratively speaking, the Nazi scythe broke against a stone the Soviet command had carefully camouflaged.

The Second World War knew no other instance of such a carefully prepared Wehrmacht offensive suffering such a crushing defeat in so short a time.

It has already been pointed out that some bourgeois historians have tried to belittle the success of the Soviet forces in the defensive battle at Kursk and to whitewash the Nazi generals who took a gamble. In the winter of 1941-1942 they blamed the severe Russian cold for the defeat of the Nazi German troops. But in the Battle of Kursk the American historian Earle Ziemke blamed a brief but powerful thunderstorm which burst on the morning of July 5 and made the entire terrain impassable for the tanks. That was why, he wrote, the 48th Panzer Corps was not able to throw all its forces into action until evening. If we are to believe the same Earle Ziemke, on July 8 it was bad weather that prevented the Luftwaffe from giving air support to the corps advancing on Kursk from

the North and it was forced to come to a halt. It is worth recalling that General Mellenthin, Commander of the 48th Panzer Corps, said no offensive had been so thoroughly prepared as this one.

The thunderstorm is not, of course, to blame. It could hardly have played a decisive role. The decisive factor was the power of the Red Army's artillery, air and Katyusha rocket launcher attacks. The staunchness, courage, combat skill and boundless patriotism of Soviet soldiers played an outstanding part in the battle. The Nazi panzer attacks of unprecedented power were smashed to pieces as they rolled against the Red Army's impregnable defences at Kursk. This battle also buried the Wehrmacht's offensive strategy.

In those hot July and August days the French Normandy Squadron fought in the air over the Kursk Bulge. Formed of French patriots on Soviet soil and equipped with Soviet Yakovlev fighter planes, the squadron fought gallantly from the start. In their very first engagements the French pilots displayed valour and combat skill. This earned them well-deserved prestige among Soviet pilots.

In July and August 14 pilots of the Normandy Squadron under Major Jean-Louis Tulasne shot down 33 Nazi planes. But the squadron suffered losses too. Major Jean-Louis Tulasne, its first commanding officer, Captain Albert Littolf, his second-in-command, Lieutenants Noël Castelain, Adrien Bernavon and Fermin Vermeil were killed in action. Their comrades-in-arms deeply mourned the loss of these brave freedom-loving sons of France. These feelings are strikingly expressed in a Soviet song dedicated to the Normandy Squadron:

"In the same sky together we flew, we lost many of our comrades too. Who were lucky enough to survive, must keep memories of them alive."

The extremely stubborn resistance the Soviet troops put up in the tactical defence zone showed that the Nazi forces could not, as the German command had planned, breach the defences by a single blow.

On July 19 Hitler and Mussolini met at Feltre in Northern Italy. At the meeting Marshal Ambrosio, Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Italian Armed Forces, asked Field Marshal Keitel, Chief of Staff of the German High Command, about developments on the Russian Front. All Keitel could say was that the German army was wearing out the Russians.

"But that is not an active programme," Ambrosio said. "It is abandoning the initiative in operations. In actual fact the Axis powers are besieged, they are in a ring. We must get out of it. What prospects are there of doing this?"

There were no longer any prospects and Keitel gave an evasive answer.

## Chapter Five

### DEEDS ARE STRONGER THAN WORDS

Reading what several bourgeois authors have written about the Second World War, I could not help noticing that they do all they can to belittle the role of the Red Army's victory in the summer of 1943. They seek to persuade the reader that the Battle of Kursk was only a minor episode in the Second World War. To this end they either keep silent about the Battle of Kursk or give a very brief account of it. In such books I seldom found a true appraisal of Hitler's plan for revenge in the summer of 1943 as an adventurist plan, or any recognition of the bankruptcy of the Nazi generals' strategy. But, as the saying goes, deeds are stronger than words. Here I would like to quote the following elementary fact. When the Battle of Kursk reached its climax our Allies landed in Sicily and on August 17 moved from there to Italy. Would they have managed to execute this operation, if they had been opposed by half the force we faced in the summer of 1943? I think the answer to this question is clear enough.

*(Excerpt from the memoirs of Marshal of the Soviet Union Alexander Vasilevsky "The Purpose of Life")*

After July 12 it was the Soviet forces that were attacking in the region of the Kursk Bulge, whereas the Nazis had gone over to the defensive. The scale of military operations widened. Other forces concentrated in the region of the Kursk Bulge, and not only those of the Soviet Central and Voronezh Fronts, were now taking part in these operations.



In keeping with Soviet plans the counteroffensive developed into two offensive operations—in the Oryol area (Operation Kutuzov), carried out from July 12 to August 18, and in the Belgorod-Kharkov area (Operation Rumyantsev), carried out from August 3 to 23.

Operation Kutuzov had the basic aim of splitting up the Wehrmacht grouping at Oryol by converging attacks and of destroying it.

Operation Rumyantsev provided for a frontal attack in the direction of Bogodukhov, Valki and Novaya Vodolaga with the aim of cutting the Nazi Belgorod-Kharkov forces in two and of capturing Kharkov.

The Nazis had intended to develop their offensive on Moscow from the Oryol Bulge. The Wehrmacht generals had pinned special hopes on it. They referred to it as "a dagger pointed at the heart of Russia". The Hitlerite command had organised powerful defences on the Oryol bridgehead with an elaborate system of field fortifications covered with engineering obstacles. Up to 37 Nazi divisions, including eight panzer and two motorised divisions, were concentrated here.

At 3.20 a.m. on July 12 Soviet artillery opened heavy and accurate fire at the Nazis and Soviet aircraft attacked their defences. Infantry and tanks of the Eleventh Guards Army under General Ivan Bagramyan went into the attack. By the end of the second day they had breached the tactical defence zone and advanced 25 kilometres. Within a week the thrust had penetrated 70 kilometres. Success was most marked in this sector.

At virtually the same time, after heavy artillery preparation the Third, Sixty-Third and Sixty-First Soviet Armies went over to the offensive, overcoming fierce resistance by the enemy. With artillery and

tank support the Soviet infantry attacked the Nazis and forced their way into the first trench. Though the enemy launched one counterattack after another, he could not stem the Soviet offensive.

On July 13 Field Marshal von Kluge, Commander-in-Chief of Armies Group Centre, was summoned to a conference at the Nazi General Headquarters. He said that in order to stop the breach in the defences of the Second Panzer Army on the Northern flank of the Kursk Bulge he had to withdraw all the mobile reserve forces from other sectors. He added that the offensive against Kursk could not be renewed. The Hitlerite command took urgent measures to reinforce the Second Panzer Army with formations from the operational reserve and from other sectors of the front. The collapse of the entire Operation Citadel was becoming a proven and inexorable fact.

On July 15 a further important change occurred in the course of the battle in the Nazis' Oryol bridgehead. The scale and intensity of the battle increased. On the morning of that day the troops on the right flank of the Soviet Central Front went over to a counteroffensive. The main blow was dealt at the centre of the enemy force that had been advancing on Kursk. After three days' fighting the enemy drove a wedge into the positions of the Soviet Central Front only to be hurled back to his initial line.

To breach the enemy's strong defences the Red Army not only needed powerful armaments, but also had to exhibit outstanding combat skill, mass heroism, persistence and self-sacrifice. The Communists were to the fore in the units and formations storming enemy positions. That was the only privilege they enjoyed. Many men volunteered to stand at their side in the fierce battles. In July

alone the Red Army formations taking part in the battle registered 89,105 new members and candidate members of the Communist Party. Upon many of the men who did not manage to join the Party in time and were killed, brief notes were often found:

"If I die, consider me a Communist."

Among pilots honoured with the title of Hero of the Soviet Union was Senior Lieutenant Alexei Maresyev, a Communist. The citation recommending him for the Soviet Union's highest award pointed out that, though Alexei Maresyev had previously had both feet amputated and had artificial limbs, he had flown seven sorties and personally shot down three Nazi aircraft, displaying courage, valour and excellent flying skill. In an air battle with superior enemy forces Maresyev had, for instance, saved the lives of two fellow pilots and shot down two German planes.

Alexei Maresyev's plane was shot down in the winter of 1942 over enemy-held territory. Though wounded, he crawled eastward for 18 days to reach the Soviet lines. Doctors had to amputate both his frostbitten feet. It seemed his flying days were over. But the Communist Alexei Maresyev returned to flying to take part in action over the Kursk Bulge. Author Boris Polevoi wrote a biographical novel about Maresyev entitled *The Story of a Real Man*. Composer Alexander Kholminov wrote an opera which was staged by the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow. But this was after the Battle of Kursk and after VE-Day. Today Alexei Maresyev is Executive Secretary of the Soviet War Veterans' Committee.

The Nazi command did its utmost to repulse the attack of the Soviet forces. Seeking to hold on to the Oryol bridgehead ground, the Nazi command

poured reinforcements into the Oryol region. In his orders General Model, regarded by his Nazi colleagues as "a lion when on the defensive", demanded that his units should "hold their ground to the last man".

In the latter half of July it seemed that the ferocity of the fighting in the Oryol sector could go no further. The Soviet Supreme Command sent reinforcements to the Oryol region. The fresh forces thrown into action ensured major operational gains. Oryol was imminently threatened with a turning movement from the North-West. A deep outflanking movement round the enemy force near Mtsensk compelled it to retreat. The Nazi forces defending the area of Oryol were now threatened with complete encirclement.

The situation was growing worse and worse for the Wehrmacht on other sectors of the Eastern Front too. On July 17 Soviet forces started offensive operations in the Donbas against Armies Group South. On July 22 the Soviet forces covering Leningrad went over to the offensive.

The Nazi forces on the Eastern Front were in the grip of a grave crisis.

The situation sharply deteriorated in the rear of the Nazi forces. Guerrillas were dealing massive blows at railway communications.

Because of the generally difficult situation on the Eastern Front and the critical position of Nazi forces in the region of Oryol, the Hitlerite command decided to evacuate the Oryol bridgehead and withdraw to the Hagen position—a defence line running East of Bryansk. It planned to conduct the withdrawal in an organised fashion from line to line from late July till late August—to a depth of 100 kilometres. But the Nazis were unable to carry out this plan in full.

On July 31 the Commander-in-Chief of Armies Group Centre noted that Armies Group staff were aware that the initial intention of harassing the enemy as much as possible could not be fulfilled. This was due, he wrote, to the declining fighting efficiency and excessive fatigue of the troops.

While the great battle was being fought on the Kursk Bulge the Allies landed in Italy. But the fighting in the region of Kursk and Oryol was so intense that in July not a single division was withdrawn from the Soviet-German front. On the contrary, the enemy was forced to shift one infantry division from the West to the Eastern Front.

At a meeting of Hitler's General Headquarters staff on July 26 Field Marshal von Kluge, Commander-in-Chief of Armies Group Centre, vigorously opposed Hitler's intention of moving several divisions from the bridgehead at Oryol to Italy.

"My Fuehrer," he said, "permit me to call your attention to the fact that I cannot withdraw a single formation from the front. This is absolutely out of the question at present."

In August one panzer division was moved from the Soviet-German front to the West. But already in September nine infantry and four reserve divisions, and in October three panzer divisions, three infantry divisions and one infantry brigade were moved from the West to the Soviet-German front. In the period from July to December 1943 the Nazi command moved from Western Europe to the Soviet-German front a total of 29 divisions and 5 brigades, including three divisions from Italy.

According to information quoted by Winston S. Churchill, in the period from January 1, 1943, to January 1, 1944, from 19 to 24 divisions of the British Empire and from 15 to 22 US divisions were active in all the theatres of the Second World

War. At the same time the Soviet Union was engaging from 425 to 489 divisions in hard battles against the main forces of Nazi Germany and its European allies.

Thus the Allied landing in Sicily had no influence on securing developments at Kursk, Oryol, Belgorod and Kharkov favourable for the Soviet side. On the contrary, the defeat the enemy suffered in the Battle of Kursk considerably facilitated the Anglo-American operations in Italy.

Early August saw bitter fighting on the approaches to Oryol, a vital railway junction which the Nazis had made a formidable strongpoint. The position of the German divisions in the region of Oryol was becoming critical and the Hitlerite command now faced the task of their urgent withdrawal. Endless columns of retreating Nazi troops and trucks loaded with loot were heading to Oryol along all the roads and often across open country. There were numerous traffic jams. A large number of retreating military units and great quantities of materiel were massed in Oryol and at the crossings over the Oka River. The Soviet Air Force was striking effective blows at the troop concentrations. Soviet forces attacking from the North, East and South formed a ring that was steadily tightening round the threatened area.

During the night of August 3-4 advance units of the Red Army engaged the enemy in bloody fighting on the outskirts of the city. At dawn on August 5 Oryol was completely liberated. Its inhabitants gave the victors an enthusiastic welcome. That same day Soviet forces scored another victory—they liberated Belgorod.

The liberation of Oryol and Belgorod gave rise to great rejoicing and exultation among the Soviet people. To honour these victories and the liberators

of Oryol and Belgorod Moscow fired the first artillery salute of the Great Patriotic War. Since then Moscow gun salutes fired in honour of Red Army victories became a tradition of the Great Patriotic War.

The freeing of Oryol and Belgorod was not only of military, but also of major political importance. It met with a lively response all over the world. On August 7 the BBC reported that even in 1918 the Germans did not experience a defeat such as they had suffered at Oryol and Belgorod. Generations to come would remember the severe blow the Red Army had dealt the Germans, thereby demonstrating its courage and skill.

It is difficult to convey the atmosphere of rejoicing with which people in the towns and villages welcomed their liberators—the officers and men of the Red Army. Not only the liberated, the liberators too shed tears of happiness. Here is a typical episode of those days.

A battalion of the Seventieth Army, which fought on the Northern flank of the Kursk Bulge, had halted for a rest in the village of Srednyaya Olshanka. When the halt was over and the battalion formed up, a seven-year-old girl approached the commanding officer. Holding her hands behind her back she asked him:

"Our soldiers won't retreat again, will they?"

"No, my dear, they won't," he replied.

The child's question moved the guardsmen who were in line. They exchanged glances with one another and gripped their submachine guns. Grigoryev, the political instructor, came forward and made a brief speech to the men.

"Can you hear the gun fire?" he said. "It's our brothers bravely beating back the enemy. Can you see these peaceful villages, the old men, the women

and children? You heard what the child asked. These people don't want to be slaves of the German invaders. They expect you, their splendid defenders, not to let the enemy come near their homes. So let us vow to the Soviet people that we shall fight to the last drop of blood, to the enemy's total defeat."

The Soviet Supreme Command was doing its utmost to extend the front of the Soviet offensive, to make the counteroffensive in the battle at Kursk become a general strategic offensive. It began on August 7 from a starting line North of the Oryol bridgehead.

The Soviet counteroffensive against Nazi forces in the region of Oryol advanced 150 kilometres to the West in 37 days. Fifteen enemy divisions were smashed in the course of the operation. The big grouping of Nazi forces was bled white. This had a major influence on further changing the balance of forces in favour of the Red Army. The capture of the enemy bridgehead at Oryol opened up broad possibilities for unfolding the drive to Bryansk and approaching Eastern Byelorussia.

The victories of the Red Army in the Oryol sector and the offensive operations on other sectors of the front created favourable conditions for a counteroffensive in the direction of Belgorod and Kharkov, that is to say, for carrying out Operation Rumyantsev.

Here the Red Army formations were opposed by the Fourth Panzer Army and the Kempf Operational Group which were a powerful force. The Nazis relied on an elaborate well-built defence system. Its tactical zone comprised a main line and a second line of defence with a depth of 15-18 kilometres. The overall depth of the enemy defence system on the Belgorod-Kharkov bridgehead was 90 kilome-

tres. Here the enemy had organised seven defence lines. Inhabited localities were prepared for all-round defence. The enemy paid special attention to the defence of Kharkov. The city was a powerful strongpoint of operational importance.

The massing of large Soviet forces in the Belgorod-Kharkov sector created favourable conditions for a slashing attack at the meeting point of the Fourth Panzer Army and the Kempf Operational Group, weak from previous battles.

On the morning of August 3 Soviet forces went over to a counteroffensive after a heavy artillery and air preparation. By the end of the day the enemy front had been breached. Soviet guards tank armies went into the 55-kilometre gap between the Fourth Panzer Army and the Kempf Operational Group. The Soviet forces began to turn to Kharkov from the South-West. Alarmed by the rapid advance of Soviet units and the collapse of German defences in the Kharkov sector the Wehrmacht command urgently began moving to the threatened area the Reich, Totenkopf and Wiking SS panzer divisions, the 3rd Panzer Division and the Gross Deutschland Motorised Division.

Soviet intelligence quickly detected the transfer of enemy reserves. The German panzer divisions were being moved from one dangerous sector of the front to another several hundred kilometres away. While they were en route Soviet bombers inflicted heavy losses on them. As a result, there were considerable delays before they reached the region of Kharkov.

Soviet guerrillas operating in the Nazi rear struck effective blows at the Wehrmacht's communication lines. In pursuit of a plan worked out by the Central Headquarters of the Guerrilla Movement the guerrillas began Operation Rail Warfare on August

3 to put the railways out of action. The operation covered a vast area extending over 1,000 kilometres to a depth of 750 kilometres. Nearly 100,000 guerrillas took part in it.

The Hitlerite command took desperate measures to stem the Soviet offensive and to hold on to Kharkov. By August 11 the Nazi command had concentrated three SS panzer divisions with a total of 400 tanks in a region South of Bogodukhov and delivered a counterblow at the Soviet forces. The enemy managed to secure a superiority of strength in the area and to drive his way 20 kilometres northward. But on August 17 attacks by Soviet armies forced the enemy to cease his advance. The Nazi counterblow was thus foiled.

The Soviet command had foreseen the possibility of enemy counterattacks and had reinforced the Voronezh Front. The Soviet Supreme Command General Headquarters moved formations of the Fourth Guards Army which had been in the General Headquarters Reserve to an area North-East of Akhtyrka.

In the morning of August 18 the Nazi troops began to counterattack in the direction of Akhtyrka. Taking advantage of their numerical superiority in tanks they managed on the first day to advance 24 kilometres on a narrow sector of the front. But the German panzer divisions failed to exploit their counterattack. By the end of August 20 the Soviet Fortieth and Forty-Seventh Armies approached Akhtyrka, deeply outflanking the enemy's counterattacking forces on their left, thereby compelling the enemy to go over to the defensive.

Developments in the Donbas took a course that was extremely unfavourable to the Wehrmacht.

On August 13 Soviet divisions pierced the outer defence perimeter of Kharkov, lying about 8-14 ki-

lometres from the city. The Nazi command responded with savage counterattacks. They were eager to hold the city at all costs. But the enemy was forced to start retreating southward. Before abandoning the city the Nazis set many buildings on fire. Hundreds of industrial and civilian buildings were demolished. Soviet troops entered Kharkov in complete darkness only broken here and there by fires. They engaged in street fighting with the retreating Nazi units.

Kharkov was liberated from the Nazis by noon on August 23. A large part of the enemy force holding the city was destroyed.

Thus the long and hard struggle to clear a vital economic and strategic region in the South of the European part of the USSR—a page in the heroic history of the Great Patriotic War—ended in a remarkable victory for the Red Army. In the course of this operation the enemy lost 15 divisions, including 4 panzer divisions, as well as 800 aircraft. Soviet forces advanced 140 kilometres, extending the front of the offensive to 300 kilometres.

The Battle of Kursk ended in a Soviet victory with the liberation of Kharkov. It was the prologue to a general strategic offensive of the Red Army.

## Chapter Six

### EMPHASISING THE POINT

**The gigantic battle on the Oryol-Kursk Bulge in the summer of 1943 broke the backbone of Hitler Germany and reduced its panzer forces to ashes. The whole world clearly realised the superiority of our army in combat skill, armament and strategic guidance.**

**And no one shall ever be permitted to forget that the people of our time largely owe their very existence and freedom to the heroic Soviet people, the Soviet state and the great socialist system.**

*(Leonid Brezhnev. Excerpt from "Following Lenin's Course. Speeches and Articles")*

After its victory at Kursk the Red Army, launching a general strategic offensive along a front of 2,000 kilometres in the autumn of 1943, advanced 300-600 kilometres westward. In the course of the battles fought in the summer and autumn of 1943 the enemy's losses in its land forces fighting on the Soviet-German front totalled 1,413,000 officers and men. The aggressors never recovered from this blow.

These facts are cited here deliberately. They help the reader to have a better understanding of the scale, role and importance of the Battle of Kursk. It came to involve on both sides over four million officers and men, more than 69,000 artillery pieces and mortars, over 13,000 tanks and self-propelled guns and nearly 12,000 combat aircraft. In its bid for victory in 50 days' fierce fighting the Nazi command threw over 100 divisions into action, that is,

43 per cent of all the enemy divisions engaged on the Soviet-German front. As a result the Nazis lost about 500,000 officers and men, 1,500 tanks, 3,000 guns and over 3,700 aircraft.

The losses inflicted on the armed forces of the fascist bloc in all the other theatres of the Second World War amounted to only a fraction of these losses. In Sicily, for instance, Italian and German forces lost only 162,000 officers and men, including those taken prisoner. In the period from November 19, 1942, to the end of 1943 in the Pacific theatre of operations the Allies destroyed one Japanese battleship, one aircraft carrier, three cruisers, 37 destroyers and 30 submarines. The losses of the Japanese army fighting on islands in the Pacific and in Asia amounted to 109,000 officers and men. During this period the German and Italian navies in the Atlantic lost 2 battleships, 4 cruisers, 32 destroyers and 271 submarines.

The armed forces of the USA and Great Britain conducted operations in areas far removed from the vital centres of Germany and Japan. They held down negligible forces of the fascist bloc. Anglo-American forces won their most impressive gains in the Mediterranean theatre of operations. The leaders of the fascist bloc were unable to reinforce their troops operating there because the bulk of their forces was pinned down on the Soviet-German front, the main front of the Second World War. It was precisely here that the fascist bloc suffered its heaviest losses in the course of fierce battles whose giant jaws devoured its manpower and materiel.

The operations of US and British armed forces in 1943 for their scale, intensity or the impact they exercised on the course of the Second World War cannot in any way be compared with the gigantic struggle waged by the heroic Red Army. For in-

stance, in the autumn of 1943 the Allied forces in Italy were opposed by 17-21 German divisions, that is to say, one-tenth the number of divisions on the Soviet-German front. It is worth noting that at the time the Hitlerite command was forced to employ 25 divisions to fight the Soviet guerrillas, that is to say, more than it employed against regular Anglo-American forces.

It was the Soviet people who shouldered the main burden of the Second World War, suffered the greatest losses and played a decisive role in securing victory over the fascist aggressors. The Battle of Kursk was a vital stage along the road of the Soviet Union to victory over Nazi Germany and its allies. It rightly occupies an outstanding place not only in the history of the Great Patriotic War, but also in the history of the Second World War in general.

"If the Battle of Stalingrad presaged the decline of the German fascist army, the Battle of Kursk brought it to the brink of disaster," remarked Joseph Stalin.

The Battle of Kursk showed the world that the USSR was capable of defeating the enemy on its own. This was of tremendous international importance. The freedom-loving peoples of the world saw that Nazi Germany had been brought to the brink of military disaster. The policy of reactionary Anglo-American circles of protracting the Second World War and witnessing the mutual exhaustion of the USSR and Germany had entered a blind alley. The prestige of the USSR as the decisive force in the war against Nazi Germany rose to unprecedented heights. The enslaved peoples of Europe confidently hoped for early liberation. The resistance struggle gripped all the occupied countries, it became better organised and more effective.

The military might and prestige of Nazi Germany were undermined. This made the domestic political situation more acute in Rumania, Italy and Hungary. Japan and Turkey were compelled to abandon the idea of entering the war against the USSR.

Western authors seeking to falsify the history of the Second World War have spared no pains to distort events on the Kursk Bulge. Many of them have tried to make Hitler alone responsible for the failure of Operation Citadel. The Wehrmacht generals who were beaten at Kursk were particularly eager to do this. Other authors, especially British and American historians, have tried in vain to misrepresent the Battle of Kursk as a minor episode in the war, completely ignoring the fact that it involved altogether more than four million officers and men. The aim of the falsifiers of history is to gloss over the miscalculations of the German generals, to whitewash the German general staff and to belittle the defeat the Wehrmacht suffered at Kursk and the impact the Soviet victory had on the course of the whole war.

But it is an incontrovertible fact that as a result of the defeat of the Nazi army at Kursk Germany lost influence with its allies. Another consequence of this was the sharpening of the political and military crisis that gripped the Hitler coalition. The allies of Nazi Germany gradually realised that the balance of forces on the Soviet-German front had changed radically in favour of the Soviet Union. This prompted them to look for a way out of the situation that had arisen. The policy of the "neutral" countries underwent a noticeable change. The collapse of the Hitler offensive in the summer of 1943 compelled the governments of these countries to reduce the aid they were rendering Nazi Germany.

The rout of the Nazi forces at Kursk created favourable conditions for the Anglo-American landing in Sicily and South Italy. The Hitlerite command had to switch its more battle-fit units from Western Europe, including Italy, to the Soviet-German front. It also had to transfer large Luftwaffe contingents to the East. This helped to force fascist Italy to withdraw from the war. In September 1943 Italy surrendered.

The creative and innovatory approach of the Soviet command to solving vital problems of strategy, of the art of conducting military operations and of tactics made a big contribution to the collapse of Nazi plans for an offensive at Kursk and later of the Wehrmacht's entire defence system on the Soviet-German front. The powerful blows which Soviet forces struck at the rear and flanks of the Nazi force driving towards Kursk from the region of Oryol immediately put it in a precarious position and compelled it to go over to the defensive. The bringing into action of fresh reserves totally paralysed the Nazi offensive on the Southern flank of the Kursk Bulge. The subsequent offensive operations of Soviet armies in the Donbas, at Lenin-grad and in the central sector of the front pinned the enemy forces down.

The brilliant victories which the Soviet Union scored in single combat against the Nazi German army and the armies of Germany's satellites in the summer of 1943 had their roots in the advantages of the Soviet social and state system and in the economic and military might of the socialist state.



## CONCLUSION

Many, very many officers and men failed to receive their awards, because they fell in the streets of Berlin. They were the last, the most unfortunate and most lamentable losses. When I read out their names there was a tense silence among the men drawn up before me. The faces of the guardsmen were stricken with grief... I walked up to the middle of the line and asked:

"Who of you fought in the Fourth Tank Brigade at Oryol and Mzensk?"

My words were met with silence. There was not a stir in the ranks.

"Who fought with me on the Volokolamsk Highway? Five steps forward..."

The ranks wavered, making way for men behind them. About a dozen men stepped forward. I felt a choking in my throat. Were these the only ones to survive?

Not all had been killed, of course. Many had been wounded or invalidated out. Some had been posted to other units on leaving hospital. But all the same what a high price we had paid for victory!

*(Excerpt from the memoirs of Marshal of the Armoured Forces Mikhail Katukov "The Spearhead of the Main Attack")*

After the Battle of Kursk the immediate task of the Soviet Army was to strike even harder blows at the enemy, to drive him from Soviet territory without a moment's pause and as quickly as possible to liberate Nazi-occupied countries from fascist bondage.

The Red Army made its most rapid advance in the direction of Kiev in September 1943. It liberated the Donbas from the Nazis.

As the continuing Soviet offensive led to the crumbling of the southern wing of the Nazi front, the Hitlerite command was forced to save its armies operating in the Ukraine on the left bank of the Dnieper by hastily withdrawing them to the West bank. The enemy hoped that the obstacle of this broad river would enable him to restore a strategic front of defence.

As the Hitlerite command withdrew its forces from the left bank of the Dnieper it sought to implement its scorched-earth policy. Himmler demanded that not a living soul, head of cattle, centner of grain or a single section of railway should remain after German forces withdrew from the Ukraine. Not a house should remain intact. Every pit should be made unusable for many years to come. Every well should be poisoned. The enemy, demanded Himmler, should find a land totally scorched and devastated and everything possible should be done to achieve this.

Despite the formidable difficulty of crossing the Dnieper, the officers and men of the Soviet Army were eager to cross over, to liberate ancient Kiev, the capital of the Ukraine, and to put an end to the atrocities being committed against Soviet people and to the devastation of the Ukraine.

Pursuing the retreating enemy in the Ukraine, Soviet forces reached the Dnieper along a 700-kilometre front by early October 1943. They even managed to secure 23 bridgeheads on the West bank. The seizure and extension of these bridgeheads, then the liberation of Kiev early in November 1943 meant that the Red Army had won the battle for the Dnieper, that it had foiled the plans

of the Hitlerite command to make it an impregnable line of defence which would enable the enemy to stabilise the Eastern Front.

The victory at Kursk and the appearance of Soviet forces on the Dnieper meant that the tide of the Great Patriotic War and of the Second World War in general had really turned. After their defeat on the Kursk Bulge Nazi Germany and its allies had to abandon offensive strategy and go over to the defensive on the Soviet-German front and on all the other fronts of the Second World War. The Red Army firmly held in its hands the strategic initiative in conducting military operations. Overcoming stiff enemy resistance, it continued its offensive on the right bank of the Dnieper, advancing to the Western frontier of the USSR. In the central sector of the front Soviet armies entered the Eastern regions of Byelorussia.

The enemy's defence system in the Northern Caucasus was shattered. On September 16 Novorossiisk was liberated. The protracted struggle for this strategic centre which blocked the Wehrmacht's progress along the Black Sea coast of the Caucasus was now over. This enabled the North-Caucasian Front to unfold its offensive, to drive Nazi troops from the Taman Peninsula and to win the battle for the Caucasus.

Nazi Germany and its allies met the New Year of 1944 in the grip of an acute crisis. It was no longer possible to stem the tide of the general strategic offensive of the Soviet armed forces. But there were still 494 days to go till May 9, 1945.

The fighting on the Soviet-German front, where Hitler's Wehrmacht lost 80 per cent of its strength, was decisive in the Second World War. In the period from June 22, 1941, when the nazis invaded the USSR, to Victory Day on May 9, 1945, a total of 607 nazi divisions were destroyed or captured on the Eastern Front. This is three and a half times more than the nazis lost on all the other war fronts—in North Africa, Italy and Western Europe. To achieve this military success the Soviet armed forces mounted nine campaigns and conducted 210 operations by groups of armies; in seven of these campaigns and 160 of these operations they took the offensive.

The road to Berlin was a long and hard one. There was fierce fighting for 1,418 days and nights along a front varying in length from 3,000 to 6,200 kilometres, as well as behind the lines in enemy-occupied territories. The Soviet people paid a high price for victory. Every minute of the war they lost nine lives, 587 lives every hour and 14,000 lives every day, adding up to the staggering total of 20 million dead. Two out of every five persons killed during the Second World War were Soviet citizens. The USSR suffered tremendous material destruction to the value of 485,000 million U.S. dollars.

Despite such losses the Soviet Army not only won through to victory in that life-and-death struggle, but also liberated 113 million people in lands West of the Soviet Union.

These and many other facts of history that no one should forget are set out in this new series of pamphlets about the Second World War published by the Novosti Press Agency.