

## **THE BATTLE OF KURSK IN WORLD WAR-2: END OF GERMAN OFFENSIVE IN THE EAST**

*Amitabh Sah*

*Indian Revenue Service (IRS) Officer, Delhi, India*

### **ABSTRACT**

*The Battle of Kursk, occurring from July 5 to August 23, 1943, is one of the most pivotal and extensive confrontations of World War II. Both the Battle of Stalingrad, which took place six months earlier, and the Battle of Kursk, which took place in July, are regarded to be the two most frequently stated turning events in the European theatre of the war.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Battle, German Strategies, The Battle of Kursk*

---

### **Article History**

**Received: 10 Sep 2024 | Revised: 27 Sep 2024 | Accepted: 04 Oct 2024**

---

### **INTRODUCTION**

The battle was among the most expensive and intense of the Second World War, representing the deadliest armoured confrontation in history, with the opening day, July 5, becoming the most costly day in aviation combat history. The conflict was characterised by intense urban warfare and close-quarters combat.

The Kursk salient, a significant protrusion in Soviet defences extending into German territory, was the focal point of this epic confrontation, which engaged roughly 900,000 German soldiers, bolstered by a substantial contingent of armoured divisions with approximately 2,700 tanks and mobile assault weapons. The Germans, determined to reclaim the initiative following significant losses in earlier engagements, sought to encircle and destroy Soviet soldiers within this pocket via a carefully orchestrated onslaught termed Operation Citadel. Nonetheless, the Soviets, leveraging intelligence that disclosed German plans, had foreseen the attack and reinforced their defences with substantial anti-tank barriers, minefields, and vast trench systems, so converting the salient into a powerful fortress. Upon the initiation of the German onslaught, it encountered formidable opposition, significantly impeding its progress, resulting in negligible territorial acquisitions and considerable casualties in personnel and matériel. By July 12, the Soviets, having accumulated a substantial superiority in both personnel and armoured vehicles, initiated their counteroffensives, signifying a notable shift in momentum. The Battle of Prokhorovka had significant armoured confrontations that highlighted the ferocity of the combat. These efforts culminated in the Soviets reclaiming the strategic initiative and establishing a foundation for a succession of successful offensives in the following years. The Battle of Kursk, featuring over 6,000 tanks and about 2 million soldiers, constituted the greatest tank engagement in history and marked the first instance of a German strategic advance being thwarted prior to breaching opposing defences. This setback signified the conclusive termination of German offensive capability on the Eastern Front, indicating a significant shift in the balance of power. As the Soviets commenced the reclamation of lost territory and gained momentum, Kursk emerged as a pivotal milestone that reinforced their determination and presaged the eventual defeat of Nazi troops, altering the course of the war in Europe.

## EVENTS LEADING TO THE BATTLE

As the Battle of Stalingrad neared its conclusion in early 1943, the Red Army initiated a major offensive in the southern front, known as Operation Little Saturn. By January of that year, a significant gap—ranging from 160 to 300 kilometers—was formed between German Army Group B and Army Group Don. This breach allowed the advancing Soviet forces to threaten the encirclement of all German troops stationed south of the Don River, including those in Army Group A, which was operating in the Caucasus region. At the same time, Army Group Centre faced mounting pressure, highlighting a growing strategic crisis for the German high command. In February 1943, the circumstances intensified when Soviet forces reclaimed the city of Kursk on February 8 and Rostov on February 14. The imminent threat of additional Soviet advances threatened to envelop the Army Group Centre between Bryansk and Smolensk further exposing the southern sector of the German Front.

Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, a key figure in the German military establishment, has been promoting "unrestricted operational freedom" since December 1942. He pursued adaptability to address the swiftly changing battlefield circumstances. On February 6, 1943, Manstein convened with Adolf Hitler at his headquarters in Görlitz, presently known as Gierłoż, Poland. During this crucial meeting, he obtained authorisation for a counteroffensive targeting the Soviet forces in the Donbas region.

On February 12, 1943, the German command saw substantial reorganisation. Army Group Don was rebranded as Army Group South and placed under Manstein's command, while the disbanded Army Group B had its soldiers reallocated to both Army Group South and Army Group Centre. Manstein was now accountable for the significant gap in the German defences, necessitating prompt intervention.

Following the Soviet liberation of Kharkov on February 18, Hitler reached the headquarters of Army Group South in Zaporizhia, but was compelled to depart the subsequent day due to the swift Soviet progression. This haste highlighted the vulnerability of the German stance.

With newly acquired operational autonomy, Manstein formulated a strategy to execute a sequence of counterattacks aimed at the flanks of the advancing Soviet armoured units. His objectives were dual: to eradicate Soviet armoured divisions and to reclaim the strategic cities of Kharkov and Kursk.

Reinforcements were present; the II SS Panzer Corps had lately arrived from France, fully equipped and nearly at full capacity, while armoured units from the 1st Panzer Army had retreated from the Caucasus to strengthen Manstein's forces.

The operation, quickly organised and first unidentified, began on February 21, 1943, when the 4th Panzer Army, commanded by General Hoth, initiated a counteroffensive. The German forces successfully encircled the Soviet mobile spearheads and moved northward, reclaiming Kharkov on March 15 and Belgorod on March 18.

In reaction to the German counteroffensive, a Soviet offensive launched on February 25 by the Central Front against Army Group Centre was abandoned by March 7. The withdrawal was essential to reposition Soviet forces in response to the encroaching German threat. The subsequent fatigue of both the Wehrmacht and the Red Army, along with the logistical challenges presented by the arrival of spring *rasputitsa*, resulted in the cessation of operations by mid-March. (*Rasputitsa*, meaning "season of bad roads," is a period in Eastern Europe when melting snow or heavy rains create muddy conditions. This typically occurs in spring or autumn, making travel on unpaved roads difficult and hazardous.)

The counteroffensive culminated in a Soviet salient measuring 250 kilometres (160 miles) in length from north to south and 160 kilometres (99 miles) in width from east to west, centred at Kursk. This salient would soon become the epicentre of the forthcoming big showdown, establishing the groundwork for one of the largest battles of World War II, initiated by Operation Citadel.

## **GERMAN STRATEGIES AND PREPARATIONS FOR OPERATION CITADEL**

By 1943, the Wehrmacht had incurred substantial losses since the commencement of Operation Barbarossa, resulting in its infantry and artillery divisions being seriously undermanned, with an estimated deficit of 470,000 personnel. To initiate an offensive that year, Germany would need to depend significantly on its panzer divisions to both lead assaults and secure positions on the flanks. On 10 March, Field Marshal Erich von Manstein suggested a strategy to eradicate the Soviet salient at Kursk with a rapid onslaught after the spring mud (*rasputitsa*) had dried. His proposal proposed a double envelopment to encircle and annihilate Soviet soldiers in the area, thereby regaining the initiative on the Eastern Front.

On 13 March, Hitler authorised Operational Order No. 5, which encompassed an operation against the Kursk salient. Although Manstein championed an early offensive, other German commanders, such as Günther von Kluge of Army Group Centre, exhibited reluctance. Kluge contended that his forces were excessively diminished to launch an offensive, and by mid-April, German soldiers required time for reorganisation. Concurrently, Soviet troops had bolstered their positions north of Belgorod, so impeding German progress. The adverse weather conditions and pervasive fatigue necessitated the postponing of the offensive.

On 15 April, Hitler promulgated Operational Order No. 6, which outlined the Kursk operation, now designated as “Operation Zitadelle” (“Citadel”), with a planned commencement date of 3 May. The strategy entailed a “double envelopment” of the Kursk salient: Army Group Centre’s 9th Army, commanded by General Walter Model, would advance from the north, while Army Group South, comprising General Hermann Hoth’s 4th Panzer Army and Werner Kempf’s Army Detachment Kempf, would assault from the south. These forces were to converge east of Kursk, surrounding the Soviet positions and sealing the breach. The 4th Panzer Army, under Hoth and aided by the II SS Panzer Corps, was assigned to execute the primary offensive, while additional formations, such as the XLVIII Panzer Corps and Kempf’s troops, safeguarded the flanks.

As the Germans readied for the onslaught, Model expressed apprehensions regarding Soviet defensive plans. Intelligence reports suggested that the Red Army was establishing robust defensive positions on the flanks of the salient and had relocated its mobile reserves to more secure locations. On 27 April, Model conferred with Hitler to propose the cancellation or substantial revision of the operation. By May, even Manstein, who had originally endorsed the proposal, expressed Model's concerns.

On May 4, Hitler summoned a meeting in Munich with his closest officers and advisors. A contentious discussion ensued on the timing and necessity of the offensive. Manstein proposed a preemptive assault but sought further infantry divisions, which Hitler was unable to supply. The model and others cautioned that ongoing delays would enable the Soviets to enhance their defences, rendering the offensive more impossible. Field Marshal Heinz Guderian, the creator of blitzkrieg, vehemently opposed the strategy, contending that it constituted a misapplication of panzer forces and was deficient in critical components for success, including surprise and concentration of power. He notably stated, "The assault was futile." Notwithstanding the skepticism, Hitler persisted in his dedication to “Operation Citadel”. He anticipated that

advanced, more formidable armaments, like the Panther tank, the Ferdinand tank destroyer, and the Tiger heavy tank, would provide the Wehrmacht with a decisive advantage. The operation was rescheduled several times, initially to 12 June and subsequently to 5 July, as the Germans anticipated the arrival of new vehicles and additional reinforcements.

Throughout the three-month postponement, the Soviets persistently augmented the Kursk salient, establishing extensive defensive perimeters replete with thousands of mines, anti-tank barriers, and artillery emplacements. Concurrently, the Germans utilised the respite to recondition their forces, especially the Waffen-SS, which conducted exercises against simulated Soviet positions. By July, the Germans had mobilised over 777,000 personnel, 2,451 tanks and assault guns, and over 7,400 artillery pieces and mortars for the offensive—constituting roughly 70% of the Wehrmacht's strength on the Eastern Front.

### **SOVIET STRATEGIES AND PREPARATIONS FOR THE BATTLE OF KURSK**

In early 1943, Soviet forces commenced collecting intelligence from many sources, including the Lucy espionage ring in Switzerland and decrypted German communications facilitated by John Cairncross at Bletchley Park in Britain. The intelligence reports indicated German force deployments and concentration zones, particularly at Orel and Kharkov, suggesting an impending onslaught targeting the Kursk salient. The Soviet leadership, including Joseph Stalin, was informed of the imminent German assault by late March. Although Stalin and certain generals initially called for a preemptive strike following the spring thaw, other prominent military officials, including as Georgiy Zhukov, supported a defensive strategy, permitting the Germans to deplete their resources against hardened Soviet positions prior to initiating a counteroffensive.

On April 8th, Zhukov articulated his rationale for a defensive strategy in a letter addressed to Stalin and the Stavka (Soviet high command). He posited that the Germans would significantly depend on their armoured divisions and aerial capabilities to assault the Kursk salient from both the north and south. By allowing the Germans to exhaust themselves against the Soviet defences, the Red Army could preserve its strength and thereafter launch a decisive strike. Stalin concurred with this strategy, leading the Soviet command to concentrate on constructing a comprehensive system of defensive fortifications surrounding the salient.

By the conclusion of April 1943, the Soviets commenced the establishment of a multi-tiered defence structure intended to withstand and mitigate the expected German assault. The preparation was facilitated by the two-month interval between the German decision to launch an offensive and its implementation, providing the Red Army sufficient time to strengthen its defences. The Central Front, under the direction of Konstantin Rokossovsky, was responsible for protecting the northern aspect of the salient, and the Voronezh Front, led by Nikolai Vatutin, safeguarded the southern aspect. The Steppe Front, under the command of Ivan Konev, was on standby to confront any German incursion.

The defences comprised three primary defensive belts, each separated into reinforced zones. The total depth of the primary defences attained 40 kilometres, with backup positions stretching an extra 130 to 150 km. The levels were fortified with large minefields, anti-tank trenches, barbed wire, and entrenched infantry positions, complemented by emplaced tanks and artillery.

Soviet commanders further prioritised anti-tank strategies, integrating anti-tank guns, rifles, and machine guns into fortified positions along the defensive lines. Mobile obstacle detachments were assigned to deploy supplementary mines along the route of advancing German tanks, while entrenched self-propelled guns and tanks provided support to the

troops and artillery in the defence. Each defensive stronghold often comprised four to six anti-tank artillery pieces, supported by infantry armed with anti-tank rifles and explosives to incapacitate opposing armoured vehicles.

In anticipation of the German offensive, Soviet partisans functioning behind enemy lines significantly impeded supply routes and communication systems. In June 1943, guerrillas obliterated 298 German locomotives, over 1,200 railway waggons, and more than 40 bridges, hindering the German accumulation of supplies and equipment and necessitating the reallocation of troops from training to anti-partisan operations. The Soviet Air Force (VVS) provided logistical support and aerial assistance to partisan organisations during critical actions.

The Soviet plan encompassed significant implementation of \*maskirovka\*, or military deception, to obscure the genuine nature of their defences and troop manoeuvres. Dummy airfields and artillery positions were established, and deceptive radio communications were produced to confuse German intelligence. Soviet forces operated exclusively at night, with stringent regulations on fires and radio communications to prevent discovery. The Soviet deception strategies were remarkably successful, leading to wildly erroneous German assessments of Soviet military might, since the Germans underestimated the actual number of tanks and infantry there.

The primary Soviet tank in Kursk was the T-34, supplemented by numerous lighter T-70 tanks. Although Lend-Lease tanks like the American M3 Lee and the British Churchill and Valentine were also utilised, the T-34 constituted the majority of the Soviet armoured contingent. At the onset of the fight, the Soviets had assembled over 1.3 million troops, 3,600 tanks, 20,000 artillery units, and nearly 2,800 aircraft. This constituted around 26% of the total Red Army personnel and artillery, 35% of its planes, and 46% of its tanks, rendering Kursk one of the most heavily fortified and defended regions in military history.

By the onset of the German onslaught in early July, the Red Army had established an extensive defensive network, prepared to withstand and retaliate against the German attack. This defensive strategy, combined with the intelligence amassed in the preceding months, allowed the Soviets to foresee and successfully resist the German blitzkrieg tactics. The stage was prepared for one of the largest and most pivotal battles of World War II.

### **STRUGGLE FOR AERIAL DOMINANCE AT KURSK**

By 1943, the Luftwaffe on the Eastern Front was considerably diminished due to casualties at Stalingrad, resource reallocations to North Africa, and redeployments to save Germany from Allied airstrikes. By June, merely 38.7% of its total aircraft were stationed in the East. Despite being diminished, the Luftwaffe could still attain localised air supremacy by consolidating its resources, with the majority of aircraft allocated for Operation Citadel. Their goals were to achieve air superiority, isolate the combat zone, and deliver close air support as required.

The Luftwaffe modified its approach, ceasing attacks on Soviet airfields and medium bomber operations because of the Soviets' substantial equipment stocks. Supply constraints, exacerbated by political activities, significantly constrained the efficacy of the Luftwaffe, especially regarding gasoline. By late June, aerial activities were limited to preserve resources for Citadel; yet, the Luftwaffe was unable to provide extended air support.

Notwithstanding these obstacles, the Luftwaffe depended on its Junkers Ju 87 "Stuka" dive-bombers, which were now outfitted with 3.7 cm weapons for anti-tank operations. New aircraft such as the Henschel Hs 129 and Focke-Wulf Fw 190 were also utilised. Nonetheless, Soviet air power (VVS) had intensified, outfitted with enhanced Yak-9 and La-5 fighters, alongside substantial quantities of ground-attack aircraft such as the Ilyushin Il-2. The Soviet pilots, possessing

superior training and heightened aggression, now presented a significant problem. Abundant stores and stockpiles allowed the Soviets to sustain aviation operations during the fight.

## **CONTRASTING FORCES AT KURSK**

### **Germans**

The German forces at Kursk comprised four armies with a combined strength of 777,000 to 779,000 personnel, including 438,271 combat troops. The northern flank of the salient was held by the 9th Army, comprising 335,000 personnel. In contrast, the southern sector was defended by the 4th Panzer Army and Army Detachment "Kempf," which had 223,907 and between 100,000 and 108,000 troops, respectively. The 2nd Army positioned approximately 110,000 personnel on the western flank. The 4th Panzer Army and "Kempf" possessed 1,377 tanks and assault weapons, whereas the 9th Army had 988.

At Kursk, German forces deployed 259 Panthers, 211 Tigers, and 90 Ferdinand tanks. Nonetheless, the Panther units, a significant number of which were inexperienced, had mechanical difficulties. As of 5 July, 16 Panthers were inoperable, resulting in 184 remaining operational. Ammunition usage reached historic levels, with July and August 1943 being the most significant expenditure on the Eastern Front.

### **Soviet Union**

The Soviets sent three Fronts comprising a total of 1.9 million personnel, of which 1.4 million were combat troops. The Central Front comprised 711,575 personnel, the Voronezh Front consisted of 625,591, and the Steppe Front, maintained in reserve, was 573,195. The Soviet armoured forces comprised 4,869 tanks and 259 self-propelled guns (SPGs). One-third of Soviet tanks consisted of light T-60s and T-70s, which proved inadequate against German heavier tanks such as the Tiger and Panther. The T-34 was the most proficient Soviet tank; nonetheless, its 76.2mm cannon was inadequate against strongly armoured German tanks. The SU-122 and SU-152 self-propelled guns have superior firepower, however their availability was constrained.

## **PRELIMINARY STAGES OF THE ENGAGEMENT**

The Battle of Kursk, among the most significant tank confrontations in history, commenced on 4 July 1943, when German forces aimed to eradicate the Soviet salient at Kursk. The southern section of the battlefield experienced the early clashes, as German forces executed preliminary assaults to capture elevated terrain for artillery observation posts, seizing Soviet positions by late nightfall. The Panzergrenadier Division "Großdeutschland," in conjunction with the 3rd and 11th Panzer Divisions, captured Butovo and Gertsovka around midnight. In retaliation, General Vatutin, commander of the Soviet Voronezh Front, commanded a substantial artillery bombardment, utilising over 600 artillery pieces and rocket launchers to strike the advancing Germans, specifically the II SS Panzer Corps. Nevertheless, this bombardment minimally impeded the German assault strategy.

In the north, where the Central Front anticipated the imminent German onslaught, General Zhukov commanded a preemptive bombardment at 02:00 on 5 July; nonetheless, it too failed to inflict substantial disruption. At dawn, German forces initiated their artillery bombardments, thereafter advancing ground troops with Luftwaffe backing. The Soviets intended a significant airstrike on German airfields; nevertheless, the operation concluded disastrously, resulting in the Soviet VVS losing 176 aircraft, while the Luftwaffe lost 26, primarily due to the Germans' superior radar and air defences.

Notwithstanding these initial challenges, Soviet air forces in the northern sector persevered until they achieved air superiority on 7 July.

On the northern front, Field Marshal Walter Model's 9th Army initiated its principal offensive on 5 July. The assault was led by XLVII Panzer Corps, bolstered by 45 Tigers from the 505th Heavy Tank Battalion, while XLI Panzer Corps and XXIII Army Corps secured the flanks. The model initially depended on his infantry divisions, augmented by assault weapons and tanks, aiming to conserve his armoured forces for exploitation following a successful breakthrough. Nevertheless, the substantially built Soviet defences impeded this idea. By the conclusion of the first day, the XLVII Panzer Corps had progressed around 9 km, while the XLI Panzer Corps reached the encircled town of Ponyri, a vital junction controlling the roads and railways to Kursk.

Notwithstanding their gradual progress, the Germans faced formidable opposition from the 13th and 70th Soviet Armies. Soviet counteroffensives, with approximately 90 T-34 tanks, were predominantly ineffectual, however they impeded the German progression. Minefields constituted a significant impediment, as Red Army fire focused on German engineers attempting to establish safe passages. By the conclusion of 5 July, the Germans had breached the initial Soviet defence line but incurred significant casualties and equipment losses. The Soviets had deployed forces to the breached sectors, impeding additional German advancement.

In the ensuing days, hostilities escalated around critical locations, including Ponyri and the settlement of Olkhovatka. On 6 July, a Soviet counteroffensive comprising the 2nd Tank Army and 19th Tank Corps was unsuccessful due to inadequate coordination, but German forces, especially the 505th Heavy Tank Battalion, effectively repelled Soviet armoured units. Notwithstanding this, the German efforts to penetrate Soviet defences encountered formidable opposition. The Germans encountered increasing casualties and equipment losses, especially as their Tiger tanks and assault guns were targeted by Soviet anti-tank weapons and artillery.

From 7 to 10 July, the German onslaught concentrated on Ponyri and Olkhovatka, where fierce combat occurred, leading to significant deaths for both factions. Ponyri was seized and retaken numerous times, acquiring the moniker "mini-Stalingrad" due to the intensity of the combat. Notwithstanding intense German offensives, Soviet troops successfully maintained critical positions, and by 10 July, the German progression had come to a standstill.

Recognising the improbability of a breakthrough, Model's commanders, particularly Kluge and Lemelsen, commenced strategising for a defensive stance as Soviet counteroffensives approached. On 12 July, Soviet forces initiated Operation Kutuzov, jeopardising the German rear and indicating a pivotal change in the conflict. The 9th Army's inability to penetrate Soviet defences, coupled with increasing casualties and Soviet reinforcements, compelled the Germans to relinquish their aspirations for a swift victory at Kursk.

### **MILITARY ENGAGEMENT ON THE SOUTHERN FLANK OF THE KURSK OFFENSIVE**

At 04:00 on July 5, 1943, the German onslaught on the southern front of the Kursk salient began with a substantial artillery barrage, signifying the initiation of "Operation Citadel". The assault was led by Field Marshal Erich von Manstein's Army Group South, with General Hoth's 4th Panzer Army acting as the principal offensive unit. Regarded as one of the most fearsome units in the Wehrmacht, Hoth's army was organised into tightly concentrated panzer spearheads, with elite divisions such as "Großdeutschland", supported by the "3rd" and "11th Panzer Divisions". This was accompanied by one of the most severe bombardments of the war, utilising more shells in fifty minutes than had been discharged in both the

Polish and French campaigns combined. The Soviet “6th Guards Army” faced the Germans, situated behind a robust defensive system of three fortified belts.

The “Großdeutschland Panzergrenadier Division” initiated the assault utilising a combination of “Panzer IIIs”, “Panzer IVs”, and 15 newly deployed “Tiger I” tanks, arranged in a “Panzerkeil” (arrowhead formation). They progressed towards the “67th Guards Rifle Division” of the Soviet “22nd Guards Rifle Corps”, but their left flank was swiftly ensnared in Soviet minefields, resulting in 36 Panthers being rendered inoperative. Soviet bombardment caused significant fatalities, and although engineers cleared minefields, the regiment's progress was hindered by muddy terrain and intense opposition. Simultaneously, the right flank of Großdeutschland progressed more effectively, seizing the village of “Butovo”, supported by the Luftwaffe's mitigation of Soviet aerial attacks. By the conclusion of the initial day, the “3rd Panzer Division” had captured “Gertsovka”, while the “167th Infantry Division” advanced to “Tirechnoe”, forming a breach in the primary Soviet defensive line.

Concurrently, the “II SS Panzer Corps”, commanded by General Paul Hausser, initiated its advance. The corps, consisting of elite divisions such as “Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler”, “Das Reich”, and “Totenkopf”, moved against the “52nd Guards Rifle Division” over a twelve-kilometer front. Notwithstanding the presence of minefields and anti-tank fortifications, the corps received support from 42 “Tigers” and more than 490 more tanks and assault weapons. The Luftwaffe delivered substantial aerial assistance, aiding in the neutralisation of Soviet strongholds. By mid-morning, the SS forces had penetrated the initial Soviet defensive line throughout their whole front, with Totenkopf advancing into “Gremuchhi” and Leibstandarte moving towards “Bykovka”.

The “1st Guards Tank Army” initiated a counteroffensive in the afternoon with approximately 40 “T-34s”, but after a four-hour confrontation, the Soviet forces were compelled to retreat, allowing sufficient time to bolster the second defensive line. By the conclusion of the day, Leibstandarte had arrived at the minefields of the second belt near “Yakovlevo”, but their efforts to penetrate were thwarted. The “2nd SS Panzer Division” advanced to the Soviet second line but was impeded by formidable defences. The SS divisions incurred casualties—“Leibstandarte” alone sustained 97 fatalities, 522 injuries, and 30 tank losses.

To the southeast, “Army Detachment Kempf”, consisting of the “III Panzer Corps” and “Corps Raus”, was assigned the mission of traversing the “Northern Donets” and safeguarding the right flank of Hoth's 4th Panzer Army. The 6th, 19th, and 7th Panzer Divisions led the offensive, bolstered by the 503rd Heavy Tank Battalion with its Tigers. Notwithstanding delays caused by minefields, traffic congestion, and a friendly fire incident that injured two division commanders, the 6th Panzer Division successfully established a bridgehead at “Mikhailovka”, while the 19th advanced 8 kilometres to the south.

Further south, “Corps Raus” breached the Soviet defences over a 32-kilometer front, moving past the trenches of the “72nd Guards Rifle Division” and seizing “Maslovo Pristani” during intense combat. A Soviet counteroffensive, bolstered by 40 tanks, momentarily impeded the German assault. By July 5, Kempf had progressed the most among all German formations but continued to encounter formidable resistance, allowing Soviet forces to bolster their second defensive line.

By the conclusion of July 5, notwithstanding early German triumphs, Soviet fortifications remained resilient. The combat on the southern front of the Kursk salient was fierce, resulting in significant deaths for both factions. The Germans had penetrated the initial line of Soviet defences but faced progressively formidable resistance as they neared the second



line. The amalgamated fortitude of Soviet reserves, minefields, and anti-tank installations impeded the German onslaught, thwarting a swift breakthrough.

### **PROGRESSION OF THE BATTLE**

By the evening of 6 July 1943, the Voronezh Front had deployed practically all its reserves, except for three rifle divisions belonging to the 69th Army. Nevertheless, they found it challenging to restrain the approaching 4th Panzer Army. The XLVIII Panzer Corps, advancing along the Oboyan axis, encountered negligible resistance in the third defensive belt, principally confronting the Red Army's second defensive line, which presented an opportunity for a breakthrough into the unfortified Soviet rear.

The situation required the Stavka to deploy strategic reserves, including the 5th Guards Army and the 5th Guards Tank Army from the Steppe Front, as well as the 2nd Tank Corps from the Southwestern Front. Despite General Ivan Konev's concerns about the fragmented allocation of these reserves, Stalin issued a formal directive ensuring compliance. On 7 July, Marshal Georgy Zhukov ordered the 17th Air Army to support the 2nd Air Army, thereby bolstering aerial operations over the Voronezh Front.

The 5th Guards Army's 10th Tank Corps pushed quickly to Prokhorovka on July 7 night. The "2nd Tank Corps" reached Korochoa 40 kilometres southeast of Prokhorovka in the morning of July 8. Vatutin led a powerful counteroffensive with the 5th Guards, 2nd Guards, 2nd, and 10th Tank Corps, 593 tanks, self-propelled artillery, and aerial support, aiming to disable the II SS Panzer Corps and threaten the right flank of the XLVIII Panzer Corps. However, the counterattack swiftly degenerated into scattered attacks due to poor coordination. The 10th Tank Corps faced significant fatalities during their attack on July 8th, when they engaged antitank fire from the 2nd and 3rd SS Divisions at dawn. Late following morning, the 3rd SS Division defeated the 5th Guards Tank Corps. Two Tank Corps fought throughout the afternoon but were defeated.

Simultaneously, the "2nd Guards Tank Corps" executed a concealed advance towards the "167th Infantry Division" in proximity to the village of Gostishchevo. German aerial reconnaissance identified the troop movements immediately prior to the assault, resulting in a devastating bombing that obliterated more than 50 Soviet tanks. This represented a pivotal moment in military history, being the inaugural occasion where an assaulting tank formation was predominantly vanquished by aerial power alone.

Notwithstanding these failures, the Soviet counteroffensives effectively impeded the II SS Panzer Corps throughout the day. Thunderclouds hovered above the battlefield, and sporadic rainfall produced mud and marsh that obstructed mobility.

### **THE GERMAN OFFENSIVE: 9-10 JULY**

As of 8 July, the II SS Panzer Corps had progressed approximately 29 km since the initiation of Operation Citadel and had penetrated the first and second defensive lines. Nonetheless, the lethargic progress of the XLVIII Panzer Corps compelled Hoth to reallocate units from the II SS Panzer Corps to the west to regain momentum. By 10 July, focus shifted back to advancing towards Prokhorovka, as first planned by Manstein since early May.

The German assault encountered fortified Soviet defensive positions manned by the 2nd Tank Corps, the 9th Guards Airborne Division, and the 301st Anti-tank Artillery Regiment of the 33rd Guards Rifle Corps. The Germans

continued their tactical progress; on 9 July, their forces neared the Psel River, with infantry crossing it the following day despite existing defensive obstacles.

Despite the German advance in the south being slower than projected, it remained more rapid than the Soviets had predicted. On 11 July, Army Detachment Kempf made a breakthrough by conducting a surprise nocturnal assault that captured a crucial bridge over the Donets River. This enabled Breith's division to deploy troops and vehicles, facilitating an attack on Prokhorovka from the south, with the possibility of encircling the Soviet 69th Army.

The events at Kursk underscored the difficulties encountered by the Soviets in orchestrating a unified defence and the constraints of German forces notwithstanding their early victories. The confrontations at Prokhorovka epitomised the broader battle, illustrating the ferocity of armoured warfare and the strategic significance of aerial force in contemporary fighting. The conflict ultimately proved a crucial juncture, influencing the trajectory of the Eastern Front for the duration of World War II.

### **ENGAGEMENT AT PROKHOROVKA**

By the night of 11 July, on the eve of the Battle of Prokhorovka, the II SS Panzer Corps had achieved substantial progress, closing to within 3 km of Prokhorovka by 12 July. General Hausser commanded the continuation of the assault for the subsequent day. The strategy entailed the "3rd SS Panzer Division" advancing northeast to access the Karteschewka-Prokhorovka road, thereafter manoeuvring southeast to assault the Soviet defences from the flanks and rear.

First and second SS Panzer Divisions were maintained in reserve until 3rd SS Panzer Division attacked Soviet defences. The 1st SS Panzer Division attacked the main Soviet positions southwest of Prokhorovka, while the 2nd SS Division pushed eastward to encircle Soviet forces confronting the III Panzer Corps in the south. Lieutenant General Pavel Rotmistrov staged his 5th Guards Tank Army behind Prokhorovka on July 11 for a strong counteroffensive. Soviet soldiers mobilised, and the Leibstandarte leadership received tank movement reports by 5:45. In preparation for the attack, Soviet artillery and Katyusha rocket regiments were reallocated.

A large Soviet artillery assault began around 08:00 on July 12. Rotmistrov ordered "Steel, Steel, Steel!" to start the attack at 08:30. Prokhorovka was attacked by five tank brigades from the 18th and 29th Tank Corps and mounted infantry from the 9th Guards Airborne Division. In the north and east, the 3rd SS Panzer Division fought the Soviet 33rd Guards Rifle Corps, which was encircling Soviet defences near Prokhorovka. After several Soviet attacks, the division counterattacked. It lost most tanks in the afternoon while advancing across minefields to hidden Soviet anti-tank positions. The 3rd SS reached the Karteschewka-Prokhorovka road despite these casualties.

The 18th and 29th Tank Corps fought the 1st SS Panzer Division to the south, while the 2nd SS resisted Soviet attacks from the 2nd Tank Corps and 2nd Guards Tank Corps. The **\*\*Luftwaffe\*\***'s air supremacy increased Soviet casualties when the **\*\*VVS\*\*** engaged German soldiers around the **\*\*II SS Panzer Corps\*\***.

Neither the 5th Guards Tank Army nor the II SS Panzer Corps succeeded. The Soviet counteroffensive stopped the German assault but cost a lot. The Soviets held their ground despite being compelled to defend.

### **CONCLUSION OF OPERATION CITADEL**

On the evening of July 12, Adolf Hitler convened Generals Kluge and Manstein at his headquarters in Görlitz, East Prussia (now Gierłoż, Poland). This meeting occurred two days after the Allied invasion of Sicily, which intensified Hitler's

apprehensions regarding possible further Allied landings in Italy or southern France. He considered it essential to cease the onslaught at Kursk and reallocate soldiers to Italy. Kluge endorsed this move, recognising an impending Soviet counter-offensive in his area. Conversely, Manstein exhibited hesitation; his forces had recently dedicated a week to traversing a convoluted array of defensive positions, and he was convinced they were on the verge of penetrating into open ground. He contended that it was essential to remain engaged until the Soviet armoured reserves had been conclusively vanquished.

Hitler provisionally consented to the continuation of the offensive in the southern sector; nevertheless, the subsequent day, he commanded Manstein's reserve, the XXIV Panzer Corps, to advance southward to bolster the 1st Panzer Army. The assault persisted in the southern region with the initiation of "Operation Roland" on 14 July. On 17 July, the II SS Panzer Corps was ordered to terminate its offensive operations and commence withdrawal, therefore signifying the conclusion of Operation Roland. One division was sent to Italy, while the other two were reassigned south to counter new Soviet offensives.

German intelligence greatly misjudged the potency of Soviet reserve forces, resulting in a swift alteration of the Red Army's momentum when they commenced their counter-offensive. In his post-war memoirs, *\*Verlorene Siege\** (Lost Victories), Manstein condemned Hitler's decision to halt the operation at a pivotal moment, however the legitimacy of his assertions about an imminent victory is debatable, considering that the Soviet reserves were significantly greater than he acknowledged. These reserves would subsequently be utilised to re-equip the beleaguered 5th Guards Tank Army, which initiated "Operation Rummyantsev" a few weeks thereafter. This resulted in a tough war of attrition for which Manstein's men were inadequately prepared and unlikely to prevail.

During Operation Citadel, the Luftwaffe conducted 27,221 sorties and sustained 193 combat losses, leading to a loss rate of 0.709% per sortie. Soviet forces executed 11,235 sorties between July 5 and 8, leading to combat losses of 556 aircraft, equating to a loss rate of 4.95% per sortie. Despite the Luftwaffe's proficiency in destroying Soviet armour and aircraft at a ratio of 1:6, the Wehrmacht lacked sufficient strategic reserves. By late 1943, only 25% of Luftwaffe day fighters were allocated to the Eastern Front, constrained by British and American air attacks on Italy and Germany.

### **SOVIET KURSK STRATEGIC OFFENSIVE OPERATION (12 JULY – 23 AUGUST)**

Before Operation Citadel, the Soviets systematically developed counteroffensive strategies to implement after the German offensive had exhausted its resources. The counteroffensives were essential in re-establishing the strategic initiative for the Red Army.

In the Northern Region through Operation Kutuzov, the Soviet strategy aimed to capitalise on the attrition of German forces stemming from their offensive in the Kursk salient. With the decline of German momentum, the Soviets initiated "Operation Kutuzov" on 12 July, focussing on Army Group Centre in the Orel salient, located directly north of Kursk. This operation involved a coordinated assault by the Bryansk Front, commanded by Markian Popov, targeting the eastern flank of the Orel salient, while the Western Front, led by Vasily Sokolovsky, progressed from the north.

The operation commenced under the leadership of the 11th Guards Army, led by Lieutenant General Hovhannes Bagramyan, supported by the 1st and 5th Tank Corps. Despite incurring significant casualties, the Soviet forces effectively penetrated German defences and achieved notable advances in various sectors. The offensives jeopardised German supply routes and posed a threat of encirclement to the 9th Army, necessitating a complete shift to a defensive posture.

The 2nd Panzer Army, which was extensively deployed, faced the Soviet assault, requiring German commanders to reallocate forces from the Kursk offensive to counter the threat posed by the Kutuzov operation. Operation Kutuzov effectively reduced the Orel salient and inflicted considerable casualties on German forces. This offensive established the foundation for the subsequent liberation of Smolensk. Despite significant Soviet casualties, rapid replenishment allowed the Red Army to obtain and maintain strategic initiative throughout the conflict. In the Southern Region, through Operation Rummyantsev, the main Soviet offensive of 1943, the destruction of the 4th Panzer Army and Army Detachment Kempf was attempted, while also disrupting the extensive southern flank of Army Group South. Following significant casualties at Citadel, the Soviets required time for reorganisation and re-equipment, postponing the initiation of the offensive until 3 August.

The Soviets commenced preliminary diversionary assaults across the Donets and Mius Rivers into the Donbas region two weeks earlier to distract German forces and undermine their defensive positions. The Rummyantsev offensive primarily targeted the northern flank of Army Group South, executed by the Voronezh and Steppe Fronts. The Soviet forces advanced beyond German defences, achieving significant and deep penetrations. By 5 August, Belgorod had been effectively liberated.

As of 12 August, Soviet forces had progressed to the outskirts of Kharkov. However, their advancement faced a significant obstacle when the 2nd and 3rd SS Panzer Divisions launched a counteroffensive, resulting in intense armoured confrontations that inflicted substantial losses on Soviet tanks. In response to this loss, the Soviets shifted their focus towards the city of Kharkov. Kharkov was liberated on 23 August after intense combat.

The Germans refer to this conflict as the Fourth Battle of Kharkov, while the Soviets call it the Belgorod–Kharkov Offensive Operation. The operations in both the north and south underscored the Red Army's resilience and marked a significant turning point on the Eastern Front, shifting the balance of power and enabling subsequent Soviet offensives.

## **OUTCOMES OF THE BATTLE OF KURSK**

The “Battle of Kursk”, occurring from July 5 to August 23, 1943, is recognised as one of the most significant tank confrontations in history and a crucial event in World War II. The Prokhorovka Cathedral, located at the centre of this historic battlefield, functions as a solemn memorial to the extensive sacrifices of the Red Army, honouring both their casualties and their hard-earned triumph. Soviet journalist Ilya Ehrenburg depicted the profound devastation of the region, illustrating haunting scenes of destruction: 'Villages consumed by flames, obliterated towns, tree stumps, vehicles ensnared in green sludge, field hospitals, hastily excavated graves – it all converges into one'. This imagery emphasises the battle's savagery and the war's impact on the Soviet terrain.

### **Strategic Results**

The Kursk campaign signified a pivotal Soviet victory. For the first time, a significant German onslaught, termed Operation Zitadelle, was impeded without accomplishing its goal of a breakthrough. The German advance was restricted to a maximum depth of 8–12 kilometres in the northern sector and 35 kilometres in the southern sector, indicating substantial deficiencies in its strategic implementation. Despite utilising powerful tanks such as the Panther and Tiger types, German forces were impeded by the Soviets' massive and methodically prepared defences.

This triumph was facilitated by the Soviet military's comprehensive preparations, encompassing the creation of wide defensive lines and the stockpiling of significant reserves. The Red Army foresaw the German advance, executing a

strategy that enabled them to withstand the opening attacks while sustaining a strong counter-offensive stance. The Soviets not only mounted efficient defences but also executed successful counteroffensives, particularly “Operation Kutuzov” in the north and “Operation Polkovodets Rumyantsev” in the south, which further exploited the diminished condition of the German forces.

British historian Robin Cross emphasised the repercussions of the Kursk fight, indicating it inflicted a psychological and material setback on the German Wehrmacht from which they could never quite recuperate. He observed that the defeat at Kursk was more consequential than the loss at Stalingrad, signifying a definitive shift in momentum on the Eastern Front. The momentum change was exacerbated by the initiation of a new front in Italy, reallocating German resources and focus from their eastern obligations.

### **Casualty Projections**

Estimating deaths from the Battle of Kursk is problematic due to the tumult of combat and inconsistencies in documentation. Grigoriy Krivosheyev, a Soviet military historian regarded as a credible source for Soviet losses, estimated that total Soviet casualties during the German offensive were around “177,877”. The analysis reveals significant casualties across multiple fronts, especially for the Voronezh and Steppe Fronts, which endured the primary impact of the German assault.

Conversely, estimates of German casualties fluctuate significantly, primarily because to divergent approaches in loss accounting. Karl-Heinz Frieser, upon examining German archives, determined that the Wehrmacht incurred roughly “54,182” casualties during Operation Citadel, included around “9,036” fatalities. Nevertheless, alternative historians propose that overall, German casualties could vary between “380,000” and “430,000”, encompassing both combat and non-combat deaths, highlighting the challenges in precisely evaluating these numbers during wartime turmoil.

The Soviets incurred substantial equipment losses, with estimates indicating that more than “1,600” tanks and self-propelled guns were either destroyed or incapacitated during the German offensive.

Notwithstanding these obstacles, the Red Army's industrial capacity and maintenance procedures facilitated a swift recuperation. Soviet tank manufacturing persisted relentlessly, with numerous damaged tanks swiftly rebuilt and redeployed to the front lines. By the conclusion of the fight, the Soviet tank inventory had recovered, sustaining the operational efficacy of the Red Army.

The Luftwaffe also sustained significant losses throughout the conflict. Estimates show that around “1,626 aircraft” were lost, with some sources indicating numbers might reach as high as “3,300”. These disparities underscore the challenges in recording aviation casualties, particularly during fierce combat and the tumult of warfare.

### **Remembrance and Heritage**

The sacrifices during the Battle of Kursk were officially acknowledged by several honours, with 239 Red Army men being bestowed the title of Hero of the Soviet Union for their valorous actions.

The Battle of Kursk is often seen as a significant turning point in the European theatre of World War II, however this evaluation is not without dispute. The fight radically transformed the power dynamics on the Eastern Front, enabling the Red Army to shift from a predominantly defensive position to one of continuous offensives. The psychological ramifications of this victory were significant, as the Soviets emerged with revitalised confidence and operational

momentum, which they sustained in following campaigns resulting in the liberation of extensive territory from German dominance.

The Battle of Kursk exemplified the strategic prowess of the Soviet military and signified a pivotal transformation in the overarching dynamics of World War II. It affirmed the Red Army as a formidable entity capable of enduring and ultimately vanquishing the German war apparatus, thereby laying the groundwork for future offensives that would alter the European landscape.

## REFERENCES

1. Beevor, Antony (2012). *The Second World War*. New York: Back Bay Books. ISBN 978-0-316-02374-0.
2. Barbier, Mary Kathryn (2002). *Kursk: The Greatest Tank Battle, 1943*. Zenith Imprint. ISBN 978-0-760312-54-4.
3. Bauman, Walter (1998). *Kursk Operation Simulation and Validation Exercise – Phase II (KOSAVE II)*.
4. Citino, Robert M. (2012). *The Wehrmacht Retreats: Fighting a Lost War, 1943*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas. ISBN 978-0-7006-1826-2.
5. Citino, Robert; Parshall, Jonathan (2013). *Kursk, The Epic Armored Engagement*. 2013 International Conference on WWII.
6. Clark, Lloyd (2012). *Kursk: The Greatest Battle: Eastern Front 1943*. London: Headline Publishing Group. ISBN 978-0-7553-3639-5.
7. Dunn, Walter (1997). *Kursk: Hitler's Gamble, 1943*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press. ISBN 978-0-275-95733-9.
8. Empric, Bruce E. (2020). *Tigers on the Steppe: Red Army Valor in the Battle of Kursk*. Seattle: Teufelsberg Press. ISBN 979-8-6316-6333-6.
9. Glantz, David M.; House, Jonathan (1995). *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler*. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press. ISBN 978-0-7006-0899-7.
10. Glantz, David M.; Orenstein, Harold S. (1999). *The Battle for Kursk 1943: The Soviet General Staff Study*. London; Portland
11. Glantz, David M.; House, Jonathan M. (2004) [1999]. *The Battle of Kursk*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas. ISBN 978-0-7006-1335-9.
12. Glantz, David M. (2013). *Soviet Military Intelligence in War*. London: Taylor & Francis. ISBN 978-1-136-28934-7.
13. Guderian, Heinz (1937). *Achtung – Panzer!*. Sterling Press. ISBN 0-304-35285-3.
14. Guderian, Heinz (1952). *Panzer Leader*. New York: Da Capo. ISBN 0-306-81101-4.
15. Healy, Mark (2010). *Zitadelle: The German Offensive Against the Kursk Salient 4–17 July 1943*. Stroud: History Press. ISBN 978-0-7524-5716-1.

16. Jacobsen, Hans Adolf; Rohwer, Jürgen (1965). *Decisive battles of World War II; the German view*. New York: Putnam. OCLC 1171523193.
17. Kasdorf, Bruno (6 April 2000), *The Battle of Kursk – An Analysis of Strategic and Operational Principles (PDF)*, U.S. Army War College
18. Nipe, George (1998). "Kursk Reconsidered: Germany's Lost Victory". Archived from the original on 10 August 2015. Retrieved 17 July 2015.
19. Showalter, Dennis E. (2013). *Armor and Blood: The Battle of Kursk, The Turning Point of World War II*. New York: Random House. ISBN 978-1-4000-6677-3.
20. Zamulin, Valeriy (2011). *Demolishing the Myth: The Tank Battle at Prokhorovka, Kursk, July 1943: An Operational Narrative*. Solihull: Helion & Company. ISBN 978-1-906033-89-7.

