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EXERCISE/EXERCICE

**NEW HORIZONS**

THE BATTLE OF KURSK JULY & AUGUST 1943

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## ABSTRACT

The Soviet victory at the battle of Kursk inevitably led to German defeat throughout Europe. It was the most decisive event of World War 2. An examination of Soviet and German Fighting Power before, during and after Kursk demonstrates the newly acquired Soviet ascendancy on the Eastern Front and therefore the ultimate importance of this battle. At Kursk, the lack of operational surprise and the time to prepare enabled the Soviets to destroy key German equipments, capture important transportation centres and gain crucial offensive experience on the way to this victory. Continued qualitative improvement of the Red Army thereafter, combined with sustainable and unparalleled mobilisation and military production, ensured that this success marked the beginning of the end for Hitler and the Third Reich. Events including Stalingrad, Pearl Harbour and Operation Overlord are presented for comparison. All prove to be strategically important but only Kursk can be described as decisive in the defeat of Germany in Europe.

There has been no instance yet in the history of wars of the enemy jumping into the abyss of himself. To win a war one must lead the enemy to the abyss and push him in to it.

Joseph Stalin, Order of the Day, 23 February 1944

Just five years after Germany's astounding

Ardennes attack

their breakthrough in the Ardennes region in May 1940.

interpreted at least two ways” largely because the German and Soviet perspectives span different planning timelines.<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this paper, the battle will be defined in its broadest sense and therefore in accordance with official Soviet history.<sup>5</sup> That is to say, it began on 5 July 1943 when Germany launched Operation Citadel to capture the Kursk salient and concluded on 23 August 1943 after Soviet forces had completed two counter offensives, Operations Kutuzov and Rumyantsev, which re-established Soviet control in Orel and Kharkov respectively.<sup>6</sup>

British and Australian military doctrine uses the term ‘Fighting Power’ to define and thereby estimate a state’s “ability to fight.”<sup>7</sup> This measure provides the ideal framework for a detailed analysis of Kursk. “Fighting Power is the result of the integration of three interdependent components: the intellectual [conceptual] component provides the knowledge to fight; the moral component provides the will to fight; and the physical component provides the means to fight.”<sup>8</sup> In short, a states total Fighting Power is derived from the summation of the moral, physical and conceptual components.

To demonstrate that Germany lost the advantage during Kursk, this paper will begin by defining each component of Fighting Power before describing how events dramatically changed their balance during July and August 1943. Having thereby

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<sup>4</sup> Niklas Zetterling and Anders Frankson, *Kursk 1943, A Statistical Analysis*, (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2000), 115.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, xiii.

<sup>6</sup> United Kingdom, Department of War Studies, *Conventional Operations*, ... 9-7 and Niklas Zetterling and Anders Frankson, *Kursk 1943*, ...xiii.

<sup>7</sup> United Kingdom, Ministry of Defence, *Design for Military Operations, The British Military Doctrine*, AC 71451, (1996), 4-3.

<sup>8</sup> Commonwealth of Australia (Australian Army), *Land Warfare Doctrine 1: The Fundamentals of Land Warfare*, (1998), 5-1.

established that the Soviets held the advantage in all respects after Kursk, the paper will then show that the situation was irretrievable. Contrasting the strategic implications of this event with Stalingrad, Pearl Harbour and the D Day landings will reiterate that the battle of Kursk alone made German defeat in Europe inevitable.

As already outlined, the moral component of Fighting Power concerns the ability to get people to fight. “[It] has three fundamental elements: the motivation to achieve the task in hand; effective leadership from those placed in authority; and sound management of all personnel and resources. Together they produce the will to fight.”<sup>9</sup> Analysing these elements, it is apparent that the Soviets shifted the moral balance during Kursk by leadership and management only. Motivation was not a factor in this regard since the intensity of emotion inherent within both sides changed little during the war. “[The relationship] between Germany and the Soviet Union had always been one of undisguised hatred and fear.... No war had ever been as brutal as this.”<sup>10</sup> This was Nazism versus Communism in what Hitler described as a “war of annihilation.”<sup>11</sup>

The capability gap between the German and Soviet leaders had narrowed markedly during the two years of fighting prior to Kursk. For Germany, regular operational success achieved through well understood, tried and tested methods had made them intellectually stale and arrogant.<sup>12</sup> As a result there was no tangible impetus to improve. “The German commanders who prepared for Kursk thought of their opponents

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<sup>9</sup> United Kingdom, Ministry of Defence, *Army Field Manual, ADP-5 Soldiering, The Military Covenant*, AC 71642, (February 2000), 1-3.

<sup>10</sup> Phil Grabsky, *The Great Commanders*, (London: Boxtree Limited, 1993), 165-166.

<sup>11</sup> Len Deighton, *Blood, Tears and Folly*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1993), 473.

<sup>12</sup> David Glantz and Jonathan House, *The Battle of Kursk*, (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 269.

as tenacious but inept fighters who had difficulty coordinating the many ingredients for modern warfare.”<sup>13</sup> In contrast, by 1943 the Soviet leadership had overcome many of the effects of ‘Stalin’s purges’. Walter Dunn Jr, a military historian, describes this recovery as a product of both battle experience and defeat.

Improved [Soviet] leadership resulted for the most part from the experience of two years in combat. Inept generals were weeded out, talented junior commanders were promoted to higher commands, and officer schools turned out thousands of junior grade officers to command the new companies and battalions.<sup>14</sup>

However, in order to continue its development and thereby gain leadership superiority, the Red Army still needed self-belief. “[Soviet] commanders ... were haunted by the terrible realization that never before had the Red Army halted a determined German offensive short of the strategic depths. At Kursk this was the unprecedented mission assigned to them.”<sup>15</sup>

In his book ‘On War’, Clausewitz highlights the importance of self-belief particularly in situations with great uncertainty. “With uncertainty in one scale, courage and self-confidence must be thrown into the other to correct the balance.”<sup>16</sup> In hindsight then, the Soviets’ best chance of victory and therefore gaining self-belief, was to fight in a ‘set-piece’ campaign. The unique circumstances at Kursk, in particular a lack of operational surprise, provided precisely that situation.

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

<sup>14</sup> Walter S. Dunn Jr, *Kursk, Hitler’s Gamble, 1943*, (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1997), 19.

<sup>15</sup> David Glantz and Jonathan House, *The Battle of Kursk*, ... 32.

<sup>16</sup> Karl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1989), 86.

“The German plan for Citadel was as obvious for the Soviets as it was for the Germans.”<sup>17</sup> The large, Soviet-held, Kursk salient presented both a serious threat to the two German Army Groups positioned along this sector as well as an opportunity for the Germans to encircle a sizeable enemy force and hence shorten the Front.<sup>18</sup> Among Soviet leaders a consensus also emerged, supported by solid intelligence, that Kursk was the place where Germany would launch its next assault.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, “from two years’ experience of German operational planning, Soviet commanders predicted with remarkable accuracy how German forces would begin the attack.”<sup>20</sup> The Soviets were ready. Two hours before Citadel was launched, the Red Army began a massive bombardment onto the German assault positions. After only nine days the German attack had been ground to a halt. Victory in this unique, set-piece battle then gave the Soviet leadership the self-confidence needed for subsequent operational success, even in less certain circumstances. In short, after Kursk, the Soviets had leadership superiority.

One important effect of Operation Citadel failing to reach its goals was that the Red Army now knew that they could withstand a German summer offensive.... Thus the Red Army became more secure and confident in its conduct of operations.<sup>21</sup>

Having demonstrated that, with self-belief, the leadership balance swung in the Soviets favour, we can now consider how the Soviets improved and gained the upper hand in the management of resources. In the winters of both 1941/42 and 1942/43, the Soviets had learnt harsh lessons from over-extending their lines of communication.

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<sup>17</sup> David Glantz and Jonathan House, *The Battle of Kursk*, ... 28.

<sup>18</sup> Otto Chaney, *Zhukov*, ... 260.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Overy, *Why The Allies Won*, ... 87.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 87-88.

<sup>21</sup> Niklas Zetterling and Anders Frankson, *Kursk 1943*, ... 148.

[In 1941/42], the winter thrusts of the Leningrad, Volkhov, and Northwestern fronts bogged down because they lacked the men and materiel needed to crack the German defences. For the same reason, the offensive by the Southern and Southwestern fronts were also short-lived.<sup>22</sup>

Similarly, early success for the Soviets on Operation Gallop in February 1943 turned rapidly into defeat. “Having come so far so quickly, the Soviets were stretching their supply lines to the limit.... The [German counter] attack was remarkably successful; within days, the two wings met up, mauling three Soviet armies in the process.”<sup>23</sup>

With these failures fresh in their memory, the Soviet approach to each task became thorough and painstaking. “Goaded on by nervous senior commanders, staff officers and commanders at every level methodically worked out the myriad of problems.”<sup>24</sup> As a result, the two Soviet counter offensives at Kursk, Operations Kutuzov and Rumyantsev were meticulously planned and much more sensible in scope. More importantly perhaps, “Stalin was more receptive to advice.”<sup>25</sup> He had begun to listen to his commanders and moderate his short-term ambitions.<sup>26</sup>

In contrast, Axis forces had not learnt how to manage attacks without exposing a weak flank. At Stalingrad in 1942, the Soviets took advantage of the comparative weakness of the Romanian armies on the flank. “Not only were they ill-equipped, they were not even up to strength.”<sup>27</sup> Similarly, at Kursk, “the vulnerability of German defences in these [flanking] regions had only been increased as German forces gravitated

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<sup>22</sup> Otto Chaney, *Zhukov*, ... 201.

<sup>23</sup> United Kingdom, Department of War Studies, *Conventional Operations*, ... 9-4.

<sup>24</sup> David Glantz and Jonathan House, *The Battle of Kursk*, ... 32.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Overy, *Why The Allies Won*, ... 87.

<sup>26</sup> David Glantz and Jonathan House, *The Battle of Kursk*, ... 266.

<sup>27</sup> Anthony Beevor, *Stalingrad*, (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 183.

towards the Kursk bulge prior to and during Citadel.’<sup>28</sup> By comparison then, the German leadership did not control resources as well as their Soviet counterparts at Kursk. David Glantz highlights this newly acquired Soviet advantage in resource management as follows: “What astonished the Germans most about these massive and numerous Soviet offensives was the fact that the defenders of Kursk were able to go from a desperate defensive to a full-fledged offensive in a matter of days.”<sup>29</sup>

During the battle of Kursk then, through better leadership and management, the Soviets had stolen the moral advantage on the Eastern Front. Can the same be said for the physical component of Fighting Power?

The physical component [of Fighting Power] is the means to fight. It is the equivalent of the term ‘Combat Power’, defined in NATO as: ‘the total means of destructive and/or disruptive force which a military unit/formation can apply against the opponent at a given time.’ The total means include ... manpower, equipment, logistics and training.<sup>30</sup>

Many would expect the balance of manpower and training to be central to most discussions concerning decisive battles, this is not the case at Kursk. Neither manpower or training were crucial factors in the battle itself, nor did this battle substantially alter the manning balance for future encounters.

Given the different interpretations regarding what constitutes Kursk, it is difficult to be certain of the relative manning levels at the start of this battle. Figures given for the Germans range from 777,000 to 900,000. Facing them, consensus suggests, were 1.3

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<sup>28</sup> David Glantz and Jonathan House, *The Battle of Kursk*, ... 227.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 229.

<sup>30</sup> United Kingdom, Ministry of Defence, *Design for Military Operations*, ... 4-6.

million Soviets in the Central and Voronezh fronts combined<sup>31</sup> with another 600,000 in the Steppe front as a strategic reserve.<sup>32</sup> At first glance then the Soviets seem to have a useful manning advantage. However, remembering that the German divisions were experienced and the level of Russian training was low, for qualitative reasons it is generally accepted that this manpower advantage was not significant.<sup>33</sup> “Red Army commanders understood that in previous German offensives they had outnumbered the Germans; yet in no instance had the defenders halted the German advance short of strategic depth.”<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, casualty figures for Kursk had little bearing on future battles. Although Soviet losses at Kursk were about 3.4 times higher than German losses, total casualty figures were comparatively small.<sup>35</sup> “Certain basic facts can sometimes demonstrate that a battle produced losses or a situation from which one side could not recover. This can hardly apply to Kursk, since neither German nor Soviet casualties ... were particularly high.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> The Central and Voronezh fronts were the fronts that bore the brunt of Operation Citadel.

<sup>32</sup> 777,000 Germans were committed to Operation Citadel according to Niklas Zetterling and Anders Frankson, *Kursk 1943*, ... 18. There were 780,900 German against the 1.9 million Soviets in the Central, Voronezh and Steppe (573,195) fronts according to David Glantz and Jonathan House, *The Battle of Kursk*, ... 65. There were 900,000 German facing 1.3 million Soviets in the Central and Voronezh fronts according to Richard Overy, *Why The Allies Won*, ... 90.

<sup>33</sup> Walter S. Dunn Jr, *Kursk, Hitler's Gamble, 1943*, ... xv.

<sup>34</sup> David Glantz and Jonathan House, *The Battle of Kursk*, ... 64.

<sup>35</sup> 56,827 Germans were killed, wounded or missing at Kursk compared to 1.6 million during 1943 on the Eastern Front. Similarly, 177,847 Soviets were killed, wounded or missing compared to 7.8 million casualties suffered during 1943 by the Red Army. Niklas Zetterling and Anders Frankson, *Kursk 1943*, ... 118.

<sup>36</sup> Niklas Zetterling and Anders Frankson, *Kursk 1943*, ... 145.

Discounting manpower and training's effect on the physical balance then, the Soviets seized the initiative in terms of Combat Power through equipment and logistics. At the start of 1943 both German and Soviet industries were operating at maximum capacity, yet their approaches to generating new equipment were profoundly different. Germany had focussed its efforts on technological development. "Soviet tank forces knew that they faced a new enemy in 1943, the next generation of German heavy tanks, the 56-ton 'Tiger' and the smaller, 45-ton 'Panther'. Both had large calibre guns and good armour."<sup>37</sup> Hitler believed these fresh tanks along with the Ferdinand, a new armoured self-propelled gun, were unstoppable. With this in mind, Operation Citadel was delayed for two months until an adequate number of new vehicles were in place to lead the assault.<sup>38</sup> "Everything that the German Army could muster in the way of attacking strength was committed in this offensive."<sup>39</sup>

In contrast, the Soviets focussed on quantity.

Compared to Germany, the Soviet Union took a fundamentally different approach to armoured vehicle design and production. The Soviet military industrial policy of the year 1942-43 maximised tank production at the expense of tank modernization.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Richard Overy, *Why The Allies Won*, ... 90.

<sup>38</sup> "The German Command fixed a date for early May. However, Hitler delayed the attack for two months to assemble more new tanks, the mark V, or 'Panther', and the mark VI, or 'Tiger', and the 'Ferdinand' armoured self-propelled gun." Robert A.C. Parker, *The Second World War, A Short History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 112.

<sup>39</sup> General Heinz Guderian, *Panzer Leader*, (Slough, London: Hollen Street Press Limited, 1970), 311.

<sup>40</sup> David Glantz and Jonathan House, *The Battle of Kursk*, ... 35.

Estimates compiled by David Glantz state that the Soviets had a total of 7,360 tanks and self propelled guns at Kursk whereas the Germans had just 3,253.<sup>41</sup> The comparison here is not simply Soviet quantity versus German quality. To cope with the new threat, the Soviets also devised new tactics and new force structures. “The increase in artillery, tank destroyer, and anti aircraft units in the first six months of 1943 radically altered the fire power of the Red Army, especially the creation of twenty-seven tank destroyer brigades and thirty six antiaircraft di Tw 12 0 0 12 33737 593.360 Tm612 95.1627 593.3te0 032 164.26968 593.on011

be disbanded. Of the 204 Panthers that set out on the operation, 162 broke down and almost all ended up being captured by the Soviets. The few that survived the Battle of Kursk had to be returned to the factories for alteration.<sup>45</sup>

By destroying the very best of German armour on the battlefields of Kursk, the Soviets had firmly grasped the advantage in terms of equipment. Heinz Macher, a company commander in SS Das Reich at Kursk, soberly reflected “the German Army suffered heavy losses of armour and equipment that proved to be irreplaceable.”<sup>46</sup>

In the spring of 1943, Germany had a far better rail network available to them and therefore logistically they were much more capable than the Soviets. In preparation for Kursk, a “lack of good rail connections created an incredible handicap for the Red Army. [For example] for many weeks 169 service units remained in Stalingrad because of the lack of troop trains to move them.”<sup>47</sup> By comparison, Germany was able to transfer twelve divisions from the Western and Bryansk fronts to Kursk within a few weeks.<sup>48</sup> The only consistent logistical advantage the Soviets held was the support of the local population. Soviets in German-held territory would disrupt German logistics whilst in Soviet-held territory they were “drafted into the operation.”<sup>49</sup>

Fortunately for the Soviets, the lull in fighting between March and July 1943 gave them plenty of time to prepare for this battle. Consequently “there was an operational and

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<sup>45</sup> Janusz Piekalkiewicz, *Tank War 1939-1945*, (Kingsport TN: Kingsport Press, 1986), 239.

<sup>46</sup> Heinz Macher, Company Commander, SS Das Reich. *Mother of all Battles, War Stories series on History Television*, a BBC production in association with Lionheart television International Inc.

<sup>47</sup> Walter S. Dunn Jr, *Kursk, Hitler's Gamble, 1943*, ... 8.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

logistical depth to the preparations for Kursk that previous Soviet plans lacked.”<sup>50</sup>

Logistics therefore had little impact on the battle of Kursk itself. How then did the Soviet’s overall logistical situation improve because of this battle? As a direct result of Operations Kutuzov and Rummyantsev, the Soviets captured the strategically important transportation centres of Orel, Belgorod and Kharkov.<sup>51</sup> For the first time since the start of the war on the Eastern Front, the Soviets had complete control over a road and rail network west of Moscow that could support their operations.

The newly won territory provided at least one additional north-south and east-west rail line for each front. These new lines ended the long detours to the east that had previously required travelling northwest to Moscow and then southeast to the battle area.<sup>52</sup>

As a result of the territorial gains made during the battle of Kursk then, the Soviets achieved at least logistical parity with Germany. With this and the significant equipment advantage already highlighted, the Red Army now possessed greater Combat Power than Germany.

The last component of Fighting Power to consider is the conceptual component. “This heading can be described as the thought process behind the ability to fight.”<sup>53</sup> Its importance is well illustrated by Clausewitz.

Theory exists so that one does not have to start afresh every time sorting out the raw material and ploughing through it, but will find it ready to hand and in good order. It is meant to educate the mind of the future commander, or, more accurately, to guide him in his self-education; not accompany him to the battlefield.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Richard Overy, *Why The Allies Won*, ... 88.

<sup>51</sup> David Glantz and Jonathan House, *The Battle of Kursk*, ... 10 & 76.

<sup>52</sup> Walter S. Dunn Jr, *Kursk, Hitler’s Gamble, 1943*, ... 20.

<sup>53</sup> United Kingdom, Ministry of Defence, *Design for Military Operations*, ... 4-3.

<sup>54</sup> Karl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ... 141.

The conceptual component of Fighting Power consists of three elements; Principles of War, Military Doctrine and Development. All these elements are closely related and therefore, for simplicity, the conceptual merit of both sides will be discussed here as a whole, rather than as a sum of the parts.

This paper has already touched upon the lack of doctrinal progress within the German armed forces during the first half of the war and the reasons for it. Illustrating this point, between March and July 1943, German effort was focussed upon reconstituting and retraining all units with new, more technical equipment and not on the conduct of Operation Citadel.<sup>55</sup> As a result, the German plan contained all the usual elements of Blitzkrieg; a sweeping and high tempo double envelopment led by airpower, armour and other motorised formations.<sup>56</sup>

The contrast between this German intellectual stagnation and the Soviet doctrinal transformation was fundamental to the outcome at Kursk as well as the rest of the war. In 1941 on the Eastern Front, the Soviet armed forces were in disarray.

The Red Army's doctrine for offensive, mechanized warfare had fallen into disrepute because it was associated with the purged commanders. At the time of the German invasion, Soviet mechanized units were undergoing their third major reorganization in two years and were caught with a mixture of worn-out, obsolete tanks and poorly understood new ones.<sup>57</sup>

Motivated by a hatred of the enemy and a fight for the survival of the Motherland, the Soviets took every opportunity to learn from their mistakes and develop a doctrine to beat Blitzkrieg.

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<sup>55</sup> David Glantz and Jonathan House, *The Battle of Kursk*, ... 16.

<sup>56</sup> Blitzkrieg is defined as “the combined use of air power and mechanised spearheads on the ground to wage military operations at a high tempo.” United Kingdom, Department of War Studies, *Conventional Operations*, ... 6-1.

<sup>57</sup> David Glantz and Jonathan House, *The Battle of Kursk*, ... 8.

As in the previous two years, The Red Army of 1943 continued its metamorphosis of structure and procedure. Special staff officers compiled historical after-action reports within weeks of the conclusion of the winter campaigns, and the lessons learned from previous mistakes were disseminated throughout the hierarchy.<sup>58</sup>

The result was a Soviet doctrine emerging in 1943 that not only took into account the previous two years of fighting but also considered the new equipment both sides were bringing into service. Moreover, the Soviets appreciated that this doctrine still needed evaluation and refinement.

The battle of Kursk was an important conceptual turning point on the Eastern Front for two reasons. Firstly, in successfully defending Kursk, the Soviets demonstrated a doctrine that was now a match for German Blitzkrieg. Comparing the Soviet defence of Kursk in 1943 with Kiev in 1941 highlights the considerable conceptual progress made by the Soviets during this period. “If the Kursk offensive had similar success [to the Kiev campaign of 1941] the pocket would have been closed in three or four days.”<sup>59</sup> Instead, facing six defensive zones, up to 50 miles in depth and with 2 further defensive lines in front of the reserve Steppe front, the Germans never came near to closing the gap. The Soviet defences had turned the struggle at Kursk into a great battle of attrition.<sup>60</sup> This was the very antithesis of Blitzkrieg.

Secondly, conducting counter offensives against a weakened and withdrawing enemy enabled the Soviets to test and develop their “new mobile force structure equipped with new offensive regulations and procedures” with less risk of defeat.<sup>61</sup> This

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>59</sup> Walter S. Dunn Jr, *Kursk, Hitler's Gamble, 1943*, ... 108.

<sup>60</sup> Michael J. Lyons, *World War II, A Short History*, ... 246.

<sup>61</sup> David Glantz and Jonathan House, *The Battle of Kursk*, ... 274.

experience proved invaluable during the rest of the war. “Kutuzov and Rumyantsev were critical and costly first steps in th[e] education process.”<sup>62</sup> For example, in the months leading up to Kursk, “the concept of the tank army was revived ... with a radical change in doctrine, organisation and strength. Previous tank armies had included both tank formations and marching infantry. The new tank armies were completely motorised.”<sup>63</sup> During Kutuzov and Rumyantsev, the Soviets learnt to strike deep at operational objectives with the tank armies whilst using elaborate deception, targeted artillery and infantry assault to fight the tactical battles.<sup>64</sup> “Neither Operation Kutuzov nor Rumyantsev were an offensive work of art” but they were successful.<sup>65</sup> With this experience and important lessons learned, the Red Army inevitably became better and better at offensive operations. From Citadel to Kutuzov and Rumyantsev, the Soviets stepped from conceptual parity to conceptual advantage. Afterwards, “though Red Army commanders still made mistakes, and Stalin drove his armies to the point of exhaustion, the traffic was almost all one way.”<sup>66</sup>

This analysis of Kursk has shown that the Soviets held the advantage in all three components of Fighting Power by the end of the battle. Morally the Soviets had superiority in both leadership and management; physically their equipment quantity and logistical infrastructure established greater Combat Power; and conceptually Soviet

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 274.

<sup>63</sup> Walter S. Dunn Jr, *Kursk, Hitler's Gamble, 1943*, ... 29.

<sup>64</sup> David Glantz and Jonathan House, *The Battle of Kursk*, ... 272.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 273.

<sup>66</sup> Richard Overy, *Why The Allies Won*, ... 97.

doctrine and development had surpassed Blitzkrieg. Nevertheless, “during the two years of Soviet-German struggle that preceded Kursk, both the battle lines and the strategic initiative [had] swung back and forth like a pendulum.”<sup>67</sup> What then made the advantages gained at Kursk irreversible?

The Soviet’s moral, physical and conceptual advantage over Germany was maintained for the remainder of the war by two factors; firstly the Red Army continued to learn lessons and improve qualitatively just as they had prior to Kursk and secondly the Soviets achieved and sustained far greater rates of manpower and equipment production. “Planning, mass production and mass mobilisation were the pillars of Soviet survival and subsequent revival.”<sup>68</sup>

In 1943, the Soviets were conscripting recruits at over four times the rate of the Germans. Furthermore, the Soviet numbers were sustainable, unlike the German figures. Walter Dunn Jr demonstrates how the number of Soviet births in 1926 supported a 1 million increase in Red Army manning during 1943.

One can only conclude that given the loss of nearly 2 million killed and perhaps a half million invalids, and the net gain of 1 million in the field army, the number of recruits added to the Red Army during 1943 must have been about 3.5 million men and women! This total supports the estimate based on the birth rate [in 1926].<sup>69</sup>

Aware that the Russians had a massive recruiting base, the Germans also embarked upon a vigorous program of rebuilding in January 1943.<sup>70</sup> “The German high command estimated that 800,000 men would be required to replace the losses of the

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<sup>67</sup> David Glantz and Jonathan House, *The Battle of Kursk*, ... 7.

<sup>68</sup> Richard Overy, *Why The Allies Won*, ... 190.

<sup>69</sup> Walter S. Dunn Jr, *Kursk, Hitler’s Gamble, 1943*, ... 22.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 37.

winter of 1942/43, exclusive of the returning wounded.”<sup>71</sup> However, even this comparatively low number proved difficult to achieve. The 1925 birth year produced only 400,000 new soldiers and therefore Germany had to lower recruiting standards and draw from industry in order to meet the target figure.<sup>72</sup> For example, “112,000 men were sought from the fifty years plus group to replace younger men in anti-aircraft, service and occupation units.”<sup>73</sup> This recruiting effort was clearly unsustainable, particularly bearing in mind the threat developing on the Western Front from 1944. From the autumn of 1943 onwards then, Germany was never able to muster enough soldiers to wrestle back the initiative from the Soviets.

“After the disaster of 1941 and the hurried evacuation of many factories, Soviet industry was back in stride by mid-1942.”<sup>74</sup>

The Soviet tank inventory rose from 7,700 tanks in January 1942 to 20,600 tanks at the beginning of 1943, in spite of massive combat losses in 1942, largely as a result of this highly successful industrial program. In contrast, German tank inventories rose far more modestly during the same period, from 4,896 in January 1942 to 5,648 in January 1943.<sup>75</sup>

Although Hitler finally placed Germany onto a total war footing on 13 January 1943, German industry still failed to keep pace with their Soviet counterparts during the

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, 38.

<sup>72</sup> Germany conscripted men who were 18 years old whereas the Soviets conscripted men when they were 17 years old. As a result, in 1943, Germany drew new servicemen from year of birth 1925 whereas the Soviets drew new servicemen from year of birth 1926. *Ibid*, 22 & 38.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, 38.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, 32.

<sup>75</sup> David Glantz and Jonathan House, *The Battle of Kursk*, ... 35-36.

rest of the war.<sup>76</sup> 22,900 tanks and self-propelled guns were delivered to the [Soviet] field force in 1943.<sup>77</sup> By comparison, “in 1943 the Germans manufactured 9,200 tanks and assault guns.”<sup>78</sup> Even with a qualitative advantage, the Germans were still falling further and further behind. Every day they faced an enemy with more manpower, more equipment and hence more Combat Power. As a result, after the Soviets seized the initiative at Kursk, the German position was irretrievable.

Those that do not accept the argument that the battle of Kursk was the decisive battle of the Second World War fall into two categories. The first agree that the Eastern Front was the most important operational theatre in Europe, however they also consider that the initiative was irretrievably lost at Stalingrad. The second take the view that the Eastern Front was of secondary importance to other operational theatres and therefore the strategically decisive event took place in another part of the world.

It is not disputed that Stalingrad was a catastrophe for Germany. Known as Operation Blue, the German summer offensive in 1942 was originally launched to defeat the Soviets by cutting them off from their oil supplies in the Caucasus.<sup>79</sup> Following rapid success in the Ukraine, Hitler altered his plans to include the physical capture of Stalingrad. After months of vicious urban fighting, the German Sixth Army was

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<sup>76</sup> Rolf Dieter Muller, *Germany and the Second World War, Volume V: Organization and Mobilization in the German Sphere of Power: Part 2, Wartime Administration, Economy, and Manpower Resources 1942-1944/5*, (New York: Oxford University Press, May 2003), 905.

<sup>77</sup> Walter S. Dunn Jr, *Kursk, Hitler's Gamble, 1943, ...* 33.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, 49.

<sup>79</sup> William L. O'Neill, *World War II: A Student Companion*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 317.

encircled and destroyed. Germany lost “an army initially almost a third of a million strong.”<sup>80</sup> This was the Axis’ “first major defeat of the war.”<sup>81</sup>

The scale of this defeat however, does not in itself make Stalingrad the decisive battle in the war. With closer analysis it is clear that Germany lost this battle rather than the Soviet’s winning it. Divided forces, a long and vulnerable flank, overstretched logistics and urban warfare, all contributed to this German defeat.

On 23 July, the day Hitler issued his directive for the new offensive [targeted at Stalingrad specifically rather than the oil supplies], his Chief-of-Staff, General Franz Halder, complained to his diary that Hitler’s misreading of the situation was ‘both ludicrous and dangerous’.<sup>82</sup>

With a more considered, modest and sustainable plan therefore, Germany could have achieved their original operational aims.

Assessing the Soviet Fighting Power immediately after Stalingrad, confirms that they were not yet the dominant force on the Eastern Front. Firstly, the effect of the morale boosting victory at Stalingrad must be tempered by the fact that the original German offensive had penetrated 350 miles of Soviet territory prior to the battle for this city.<sup>83</sup> Secondly, the crushing defeat of the Soviets at Kharkov, just two months after the Sixth Army had surrendered, demonstrates that Germany still had the Combat Power and conceptual astuteness to defeat the Red Army and thereby regain the initiative. Finally, and perhaps the most telling evidence of all, is the Soviet decision to fight on the defensive initially at Kursk. Marshal Zhukov’s assessment to Stalin on 8 April 1943 counselled against a pre-emptive attack. “It will be better if we wear the enemy out in

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<sup>80</sup> United Kingdom, Department of War Studies, *Conventional Operations*,...3-4.

<sup>81</sup> Richard Overy, *Why The Allies Won*, ... 64.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, 67.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, 67.

defensive action, destroy his tanks, and then, taking in fresh reserves, by going over to an all out offensive, we will finish off the enemy's main grouping."<sup>84</sup> If Zhukov and the other Red Army leaders had more confidence, more Combat Power and more tactical ability than the Germans prior to Kursk why would they have felt the need to wait? Although Stalingrad was a disaster for Germany, it was not decisive.

Discarding Stalingrad then, what about Pearl Harbour and D Day? Proposing that the Eastern Front was of secondary importance to the Western Front in the defeat of Germany in Europe ignores three important facts. Firstly, throughout the war, direct support from Britain and the United States to the Soviets was limited. Secondly, the Western Front did not distract German Forces from the East in the critical years of 1942 and 1943. Thirdly, the scale and geographical extent of the Eastern Front dwarfed all other theatres.<sup>85</sup>

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour brought the powerful United States into war with Germany and Italy as well as Japan in December 1941.<sup>86</sup> Whilst this had huge implications in many parts of the world, it had no direct impact upon the Eastern Front. The United States only helped the Soviets by providing a number of Lend-Lease vehicles and by exchanging some intelligence. On its own, this contribution could hardly be considered decisive. Notably, several analysts even judge that the intent of United States support was only to help the Soviets achieve parity with Germany. "It was assumed, the Western allies would tip the balance in World War 2 after both Russia and Germany were exhausted. And, the slaughter would leave both Germany and Russia weak in the post-

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<sup>84</sup> David Glantz and Jonathan House, *The Battle of Kursk*, ... 29.

<sup>85</sup> Richard Overy, *Why The Allies Won*, ... 321.

<sup>86</sup> Michael J. Lyons, *World War II, A Short History*, ... 149.

war world.”<sup>87</sup> The Red Army achievements on the Eastern Front therefore, can only be credited to the Soviets themselves.

There is no doubt that Operation Overlord, also known as the D Day landings, was a great and important success for the Western Allies. “The invasion of Normandy will forever remain an event of the first order in the history of war. It was the first big operation to succeed fully in bringing together and leading the forces of all three services to attain one strategic goal.”<sup>88</sup> However, in view of the Soviet progress on the Eastern Front, these landings occurred too late in the war to be decisive in the defeat of Germany. In 1942 and 1943 the Soviets would certainly have benefited from its allies creating a second Front and drawing German forces away from the East. At the time though this was unachievable. “The transfer of divisions from France to Russia between December 1942 and June 1943 was based on a decision by Hitler that there would be no second Front in France in 1943.”<sup>89</sup> By the time of the D Day landings, the Germans on the Eastern Front were already fighting a desperate defence. The Red Army had liberated Soviet soil and was rapidly closing in on Warsaw.<sup>90</sup> Overlord then was not important in bringing about the downfall of Hitler and the Third Reich – the Eastern Front had already ensured this. Overlord was important because it would lead to the defeat of German forces in the West and therefore set the political conditions for post-war Western Europe.

At the start of the war, “the quantity and quality of [the German] armed forces were in another league altogether. ... If the defeat of the German army was the central

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<sup>87</sup> Walter S. Dunn Jr, *Kursk, Hitler’s Gamble, 1943*, ... xi.

<sup>88</sup> General Sir William Jackson, *Overlord Normandy 1944*, (Newark, University of Delaware Press, 1978), 217.

<sup>89</sup> Walter S. Dunn Jr, *Kursk, Hitler’s Gamble, 1943*, ... 44.

<sup>90</sup> Michael J. Lyons, *World War II, A Short History*, ... 249.

strategic task, the main theatre for it was the conflict on the Eastern Front.”<sup>91</sup> A comparison of the number of divisions and casualties in Europe illustrates the overwhelming scale of the Eastern Front compared with others.

Soviet forces destroyed or disabled an estimated 607 Axis divisions between 1941 and 1945.... The other main fronts involved for most of the war much smaller forces. The German army fielded only 20-30 divisions at most in the Italian theatre, but succeeded in preventing Allied victory there for two years. The war in France in 1944, where Germany could have employed over fifty divisions, mostly understrength and some indifferently armed, was fought in its decisive phase between fifteen Allied divisions and fifteen German.<sup>92</sup>

Total casualty figures tell a similar story. The Soviets suffered at least 7.5 million military and more than 10 million civilian dead. Germany had at least 3.5 million soldiers killed with 1 million civilians. France and Britain suffered over 400,000 deaths and the United States lost 290,000.<sup>93</sup> Given all these figures, there can be no doubt that the Eastern Front inflicted the greatest damage upon German Combat Power and therefore Fighting Power.

Without question then Germany irretrievably lost the moral, physical and conceptual advantage over its enemies at Kursk. As a result, their total defeat in Europe was inevitable. “Soviet success at Kursk, with so much at stake, was the most important single victory of the war. It ranks with the great set piece battles of the past... It was the point at which the initiative passed to the Soviet side.”<sup>94</sup>

“The reasons for Soviet victory on such a scale in 1943 are active Soviet reasons, the result of a remarkable resurgence in Soviet Fighting Power and organisation after a

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<sup>91</sup> Richard Overy, *Why The Allies Won*, ... 321.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, 321.

<sup>93</sup> Michael J. Lyons, *World War II, A Short History*, ... 317.

<sup>94</sup> Richard Overy, *Why The Allies Won*, ... 96.

year and a half of shattering defeats.”<sup>95</sup> Morally, victory at Kursk enabled the vastly improved leadership and management skills of the Soviets to blossom with self-confidence. Physically, this battle exhibited the amazing recovery of Soviet industry, which by then was appreciably out producing the Germans. And conceptually, Kursk revealed the immense development in Soviet military planning and execution that astounded their enemy. “While the Germans rebuilt their divisions, the Red Army was regenerated into a far more formidable foe with improved leadership and better weapons ... that would meet the challenge of the summer.”<sup>96</sup>

In the Operation Order that initiated Operation Citadel, Hitler stated, “this attack is of the utmost importance.”<sup>97</sup> To his ultimate cost, he was right. German defeat at Kursk combined with the relentless reinforcement of Soviet manpower and equipment thereafter ensured the situation was irretrievable. General Heinz Guderian, Inspector of [German] Armoured Forces in 1943, described the failure of Citadel as a “decisive defeat.”<sup>98</sup> Neither the loss of the Sixth Army at Stalingrad, the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbour or the D Day landings compare in strategic importance. It was Soviet success at the battle of Kursk that ensure

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