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Soviet Partisan Warfare: Integral to the Whole

by

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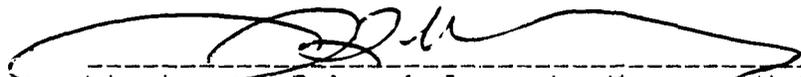
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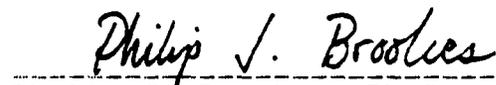
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ABSTRACT

SOVIET PARTISAN WARFARE: INTEGRAL TO THE WHOLE
by Major Russell W. Glenn, USA

Soviet use of partisans has demonstrated an attitude on irregular warfare quite different than the typical western perspective. Soviet irregular warfare in the Russian Civil War and World War II was an integral part of the totality of armed struggle. It supported conventional actions as did armor or artillery support. This coordination of regular and partisan operations was facilitated by the firm control the Soviet state required in implementing irregular warfare. The Soviet General Staff and subordinate partisan commands assigned missions which struck at enemy vulnerabilities and critical points. Synchronization of the partisan and regular force missions abetted the unbalancing of the enemy center of gravity.

This study first establishes the theoretical and historical bases for partisan warfare in the Soviet Union. There follows a review of World War II partisan warfare. The study concludes with an analysis of Operation Bagration in Belorussia during the summer of 1944 and the integration of partisan and 65th Army actions during that operation. The concepts of irregular warfare being a part of the totality of warfare, of a strong control structure, and of the role of the partisans in attacking enemy vulnerabilities and critical points are developed continually in the analysis.

Contemporary implications of World War II partisan warfare exist for both the armed forces of the Soviet Union and those of its surrogates. Its impact is apparent in the current Soviet emphasis on Spetsnaz, airborne, and airmobile forces. Soviet surrogates are fertile ground for development of partisan actions. Most importantly, Western war fighters who persist in separating irregular and regular warfare fail to grasp the inseparable nature of the two in Soviet thinking.

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Introduction

Irregular warfare is not a separate form of war from the Soviet perspective; it is organic to the whole of warfare. It has abetted the destruction of enemy centers of gravity as an integral part of armed struggle in both the Russian Civil War and World War II. The effectiveness of irregular warfare has been possible only because of the centralization of control maintained by the Soviet government, a control they deem essential.

This analysis reviews the Soviet development of irregular warfare and its use by the Soviet state. The investigation opens with the theoretical and historical background of Soviet partisan doctrine and its use in the Second World War. There follows a review of World War II partisan warfare with regard to its role in unbalancing the enemy's center of gravity. The study concludes with an analysis of the Soviet operation in Belorussia during the summer of 1944 and the integration of partisan and 65th Army actions during that operation.

The analysis develops three primary concepts. First, the Soviets view irregular warfare as an organic component of armed struggle, not as an entity separate from conventional operations. This view has its source in their dialectic approach to analysis; they focus on the unity of opposing forces in a process that results in synthesis. Secondly, firm political control is essential to the Soviet

use of partisans. Their political system does not tolerate the existence of a politically viable and armed entity without its subjugation to the Communist Party. Finally, the study establishes the role of the partisans as a complement to regular forces; partisans struck vulnerabilities and critical points in coordination with conventional units to attack the enemy center of gravity.

"Center of gravity", when used in this study, refers to the mass of the enemy or one's own forces. This is in keeping with Clausewitz's concept of center of gravity as discussed in Book 6, Chapter 27 of On War (but differs with that of FM 100-5, May 1986) where the author speaks of the concept as follows:

...the blow from which the broadest and most favorable repercussions can be expected will be aimed against that area where the greatest concentration of enemy troops can be found...A center of gravity is always found where the mass is concentrated most densely.¹ [emphases are in original]

Attacking the enemy's center of gravity directly is possible. It is frequently more effective to unbalance it by striking at his vulnerabilities and critical points while applying one's own center of gravity against the opposition's weaknesses.

Irregular forces are "armed individuals or groups who are not members of the regular armed forces, police, or other internal security forces."² and irregular warfare is

warfare involving conflict between these and other forces. A partisan, defined in the Soviet Union Military Affairs Military Encyclopedic Dictionary, is "a person who voluntarily takes part as a member of armed organized partisan forces on enemy-occupied territory (territory controlled by a reactionary regime)." Partisan units, defined in the same dictionary, are "organizationally independent partisan combat units. They [are] not a part of the regular forces."³ Soviet Second World War partisan units were therefore irregular forces.

History and Theory of Soviet Partisan Operations

The Soviets view warfare as a whole; they study it using dialectic logic with a focus on the unity of its organic parts.⁴ Viewed from this perspective, partisan warfare is not separate from conventional warfare but complements regular operations just as does air or artillery support. Partisans were only a means to the Soviet end in World War II: the destruction of the German center of gravity and ultimate victory. To view partisan units as many writers do, as less than decisive, less than completely effective as a fighting force, as a force which would have met defeat had it not been accompanied by regular army action, is to fail to understand Soviet thinking. The partisans were not a force in and of themselves. Irregular warfare was not an independent means of defeating the

Germans. Rather both were part of the whole of Soviet warfare. Nor were the partisans merely a military force. They were critical to the long term political end as well as the short term military goal.

Historical experience with partisans prior to World War II influenced Soviet attitudes toward irregular warfare as did their study of warfare as a whole. There was a history of effective partisan operations, but one laced with distrust due to a lack of political control over these forces. Control was key to the decision to implement partisan warfare against Axis forces, and partisan warfare in the Soviet Union during World War II was characterized by the centralized nature of its oversight. It was this same control which made the close coordination of partisan and regular army actions possible at the operational level.

Soviet studies included the reading of On War. Clausewitz admitted his understanding of irregular warfare was limited, but he did study it as what he called "general uprisings." Although limited in experience with irregular warfare, Clausewitz well understood its character:

By its very nature, such scattered resistance will not lend itself to major actions, closely compressed in time and space. Its effect is like that of the process of evaporation: it depends on how much surface is exposed. The greater the surface and the area of contact between it and the enemy forces, the thinner the latter have to be spread, the greater the effect of a general uprising. Like smoldering embers, it consumes the basic foundations of the enemy forces...To be

realistic, one must therefore think of a general insurrection within the framework of a war conducted by the regular army, and coordinated in one all-encompassing plan.⁵

Clausewitz further understood the need for direct regular force support for irregular groups:

A commander can more easily shape and direct the popular insurrection by supporting the insurgents with small units of the regular army.⁶

The success of irregular warfare depended on five conditions being met:

- 1) the war had to be fought in the interior of the country conducting a general uprising,
- 2) the war could not be quickly settled by a single stroke,
- 3) the theater of operations had to be large,
- 4) the national character had to be suited to such fighting, and
- 5) the country had to be rough and inaccessible.⁷

Clausewitz could have been describing Russia, and well he might have been. His personal experiences with partisan warfare were limited to his time spent in the service of the czar and King of Prussia. Clausewitz served as a staff officer in the Russian Army in 1812; during that period the Russian General Davidov commanded a partisan unit behind French lines. Davidov made it clear

that partisan warfare aims neither at inflicting pinpricks on the enemy, such as kidnapping an isolated sentry, nor at achieving a decisive victory by a frontal attack on his main force. This type of warfare "is concerned with the entire area which separates the enemy from his operational base," and its objectives are "to cut the communication lines, destroy all units and wagons wanting to join up with him, inflict surprise blows on the enemy left without food and cartridges and at the same time block his retreat. This is the real meaning of partisan warfare."⁸

While partisan operations were effective against the French in harassing their rear, Kutuzov, commander of the Russian forces, feared their use:

there seemed too much doubt about what these armed groups of peasants would do after the French had been expelled. For him it was more likely that they would use these arms to turn upon their landlords and attempt to throw off the bondage of serfdom.⁹

This concern over control has been common to czarist Russia and Soviet leaders alike.

The Russians in 1812-1813 demonstrated the physical and psychological effectiveness of partisan warfare. Clausewitz used its lessons to develop several important theoretical concepts. He saw irregular warfare's value in causing the enemy to disperse his force, thereby reducing his ability to focus combat power at a given place and time. Stated differently, irregular warfare interfered with the enemy's strengthening of his own center of gravity. Clausewitz likewise saw the need to sustain the irregular force with

limited regular army support. Thirdly, irregular warfare was a source of friction for the enemy commander. His timetables and strength estimates were upset by these forces. Finally, and critically, Clausewitz recognized that irregular and regular operations had to be "coordinated in one all-encompassing plan."

Lenin read and carefully studied Clausewitz in 1915,¹⁰ but his experiences with partisan activities date to earlier in the 20th century. The failed October, 1905 revolution was led by members of soviets in St. Petersburg and Moscow. Soviets were groups which acted as strike committees to further worker demands. Although Lenin did not see value in these organizations, Trotsky found them to be of service in furthering the goals of the Bolsheviks. They acted as the violent arm of party while technically remaining outside its jurisdiction.¹¹ With the failure of the 1905 revolution, however, Lenin saw the need to perpetuate the use of violence in the service of the Bolshevik cause. The soviets had failed, yet Lenin noted the value of "partisan" activities in raising funds and eliminating party enemies, primarily public officials. In his October, 1906 treatise "Partisan Warfare", Lenin addressed the use of terrorism in the service of the Bolshevik cause.¹² Acts of crime were executed by professional criminals in groups known as "attack squads" or "combat groups". However, these criminals often failed to act in the best interests of the

party and frequently kept the spoils of their attacks to themselves. Lenin used party representatives in attempts to keep the organizations clear of "dubious and unreliable elements". Such supervisors would approve or disapprove of attack squad actions, handle major operations' logistical support, and generally oversee partisan activities.¹³ Attack squad use never extended to anything other than assassinations and robbery of governmental agencies, private businesses, or affluent individuals.¹⁴ They were, however, an irregular force in the service of the Bolsheviks.

Lenin learned the need for close control by the party over "partisan" activities. He recognized as well that such activities could not alone achieve the objectives of the struggle, but that the party must integrate partisan and other means of forwarding its aims. Here were sown the seeds for the development of partisan doctrine as executed in World War II.

Lenin better synthesized his thinking on partisan warfare during his later exile and reading of Clausewitz. His first opportunity to apply his concepts came in the Russian Civil War. Bolshevik partisans in large numbers worked with Red Army forces during operations in the east and south. As important as their military role were the political effects of their actions. Often working where the peasants had suffered forced requisitions by White Army units, "they forged bonds of sympathy between themselves and

the population...so that it became impossible to distinguish the Partisan from the peaceful peasant."¹⁵

Partisans were notably effective in the eastern theater of the Civil War. Here the Red Army offensive of 1919-1920 was characterized by the cooperation of the Red Army and partisans during operations. The weak White coalition of forces suffered blows to their cohesiveness and vulnerable supply lines from the rear while the Red Army battled them at the front. With pressure from within and outside their territory, the White center of gravity was destroyed by the joining of the "external" and "internal" fronts.¹⁶

Partisans also served as intelligence gathering forces, reporting the status of White forces, rear area conditions, and the status of organized defenses. Activities of partisans and regular army units were coordinated through Revolutionary Military Council (RVS) representatives at the front and subordinate RVS sections of the 5th and 3rd Armies.¹⁷ The partisans were also aided during this period by infiltrations of small communist groups from the Siberian Bureau of the Control Committee who worked with them.¹⁸ These practices of controlling partisan activities from army staff sections and of sending trained personnel to lead and control partisan groups would continue in the Second World War.

Lenin and the hierarchy of the party recognized the value of partisan warfare, but they had learned the

necessity for close control of its forces. In a top secret ciphred telegram to the Military Revolutionary Council of the Eastern Front (July 17, 1919), Lenin warned the body to take

special measures [to] ensure against pilfering of arms by the Ural workers so as to prevent the growth among them of disastrous partisan mentality; secondly, to see that the Siberian partisan movement does not demoralize our troops.¹⁹

In later eastern operations (November, 1919-January, 1920), regular forces eliminated the potential threat inherent in armed irregulars by incorporating bypassed partisan units into their ranks.²⁰ Order number 1117 of December 26, 1919 formally subordinated partisan units to military commands.²¹

Thus the Bolshevik lessons in using partisans in the Civil War were mixed. While they had been an effective force in targeting White vulnerabilities in rear areas and in providing valuable intelligence to regular forces, their political reliability and influence were to be feared. The Civil War had confirmed the value and risks of using partisans learned in 1812 and in the reading of Clausewitz.

The ultimate question was whether the benefits of irregular warfare exceeded these risks to the Soviet state. Lenin saw value in partisan operations in spite of the dangers. He recognized partisan potential to outmaneuver larger, less mobile forces, to concentrate on vital

vulnerabilities to weaken the enemy, to reduce enemy morale, and to bond the civilian population with the Red government.²²

Frunze, a prominent Civil War commander, was avid in his support of partisans. He recognized the importance of the rear and the import of rear area operations:

in our time, the union of the front with the rear must come much closer, more direct and decisive. The life and work of the front at any given moment is conditioned by the work and condition of the rear. And, in this sense, the center of gravity in the waging of war has moved back from the front--to the rear."²³

Marshal Tukhachevsky, likewise a successful commander during the Civil War, stated that "by organizing uprisings and partisan actions in the rear of the enemy we also create a favorable [cor]relation of forces."²⁴ Tukhachevsky's chief-of-staff noted the value of partisans in "unexpectedly inflict[ing] damage on the enemy's soft spots [emphasis in original]."²⁵ Partisans forced the enemy to fight on two fronts. They also provided a deep attack capability for Red forces. As such they were an effective implement of war.

Interwar analyses of Civil War partisan activities were both historical and theoretical. In using the dialectic logic characterized by the unity of opposites,²⁶ Soviets tended to concentrate on the unity, westerners on the opposites. Thus while the west has viewed irregular and regular warfare as two distinct forms of conflict, the

Soviets have viewed them as components of the whole of warfare. As such there is no irregular and regular war, but rather warfare which includes partisan operations as a means to an end, just as tank maneuver and air strikes serve that end. Victory is the synthesis of these means. The introduction to the third volume of The Civil War, 1917-1921 addresses this issue, stating "one can count on the fact that warfare of such a type in [the] future...will become the perfect fellow-traveler of regular warfare."²⁷

Although no official guidance for the integration of regular and partisan actions at either the tactical or operational levels would appear in field regulations until 1944,²⁸ the Russian Partisan Directive of 1933 outlined a general plan for partisan warfare should Russia suffer invasion.²⁹ The Soviet leadership continued to question the political reliability of such forces, but trained a nucleus of potential partisan leaders and sent some of them to fight in the Spanish Civil War of 1936-1939. At least one of these veterans created a school for partisan warfare in the Soviet Union upon his return.³⁰ The Soviets also closely studied the writings of Mao Tsetung on guerrilla warfare during the Chinese Civil War.³¹

The Soviets thus were well-versed in irregular warfare prior to Operation Barbarossa in 1941. They had studied the writings of Clausewitz, Mao, and had tested the medium in Spain. They had seen its use in their civil war as a deep

attack asset which could assist in unbalancing the enemy center of gravity. They recognized the absolute need for firm military and political control over partisan forces. They also saw partisan warfare as more than a military tool. Its influence was potent for propaganda use and for assuring continued support of citizens in enemy held territory. While it was an effective force, it was not of itself a decisive one. Partisan warfare was, however, organic to the waging of war.

Soviet Partisan Warfare in World War II

Although partisan warfare had been envisioned by Soviet leadership prior to the German invasion of June 22, 1941, they had not considered its use at the magnitude realized by the conclusion of World War II.³² The partisan movement in the Second World War began haltingly and only by 1943-1944 did it begin to achieve its full potential as a military and political implement of the Soviet regime. Contrary to propaganda, the partisan movement was not the child of a popular uprising, but rather was a well-controlled and directed entity integrated into the whole of warfare.

Partisan warfare grew from virtually no force at all in the summer of 1941 to the strengths shown in Table 1. The total number of individuals involved in the partisan force over the duration of the war totals an estimated 400,000-500,000.

| Time Period | Estimated Soviet Partisan Strength |
|---------------|------------------------------------|
| January, 1942 | 30,000 |
| Summer, 1942 | 150,000 |
| Summer, 1943 | 200,000 |
| June, 1944 | 150,000 - 200,000* |

* The number of active partisans was reduced as Soviet forces regained occupied territory.

Table 1: Estimated Soviet Partisan Strength During WWII³³

The growth of Soviet partisan warfare passed through three stages.³⁴ The first phase began with the German invasion in June, 1941 and ended in December of that year. Most effective partisan organizations were formed from Red Army stragglers whose units had been bypassed in early fighting. Many of the soldiers were natives of the areas in which they had fought; their ability to survive and take advantage of the terrain was therefore facilitated by previous experience.³⁵

Partisan actions in phase one were independent of regular army and other irregular operations.³⁶ Many groups were fighting for little other than survival; they were poorly equipped, poorly led, and attempted to avoid contact with Germans. The population was unsympathetic to the partisan cause, the more so when partisans attempted to deprive them of limited foodstuffs. As such, irregular warfare was ineffective as a component of Soviet warfare.

Partisan actions were little more than the pinpricks General Davidov had scorned in 1812.

Phase two began in December of 1941 and ended in the summer of the following year. The success of Soviet offensives late in 1941 and the German policy of atrocity against civilians precipitated rapid growth in partisan numbers and support from the population. Partisan units now frequently controlled the population in large areas⁴³ through a combination of assistance and severe retribution against those collaborating with the enemy or failing to support the cause. Violent partisan actions were directed against the Germans as part of a systematic program of provocation to incite German reactions against the civilian population and drive the people to a pro-partisan stance.³⁷

With the growth of partisan strength came the need to secure firm control over its actions. On May 30, 1942 the Central Committee created the Central Staff of the Partisan Movement³⁸ and appointed P. K. Ponomarenko as its chief of staff. The same directive ordered organization of six regional partisan movement staffs subordinate to the Central Staff.³⁸ Efficiency and organization of partisan activities improved immediately.

The importance of this control in light of Lenin's experiences can not be overstated. "The important innovation in Soviet partisan warfare in the Soviet-German war was the strict degree of centralized command and

control."⁴⁰ To strengthen the leader base, Red Army officers were frequently flown in to assume command of the units or to serve in other key positions.⁴¹ Early groups had been very dependent on their commanders or commissars; loss of these individuals had often led to complete loss of unit cohesion and the disintegration of the unit during the winter of 1941-42.

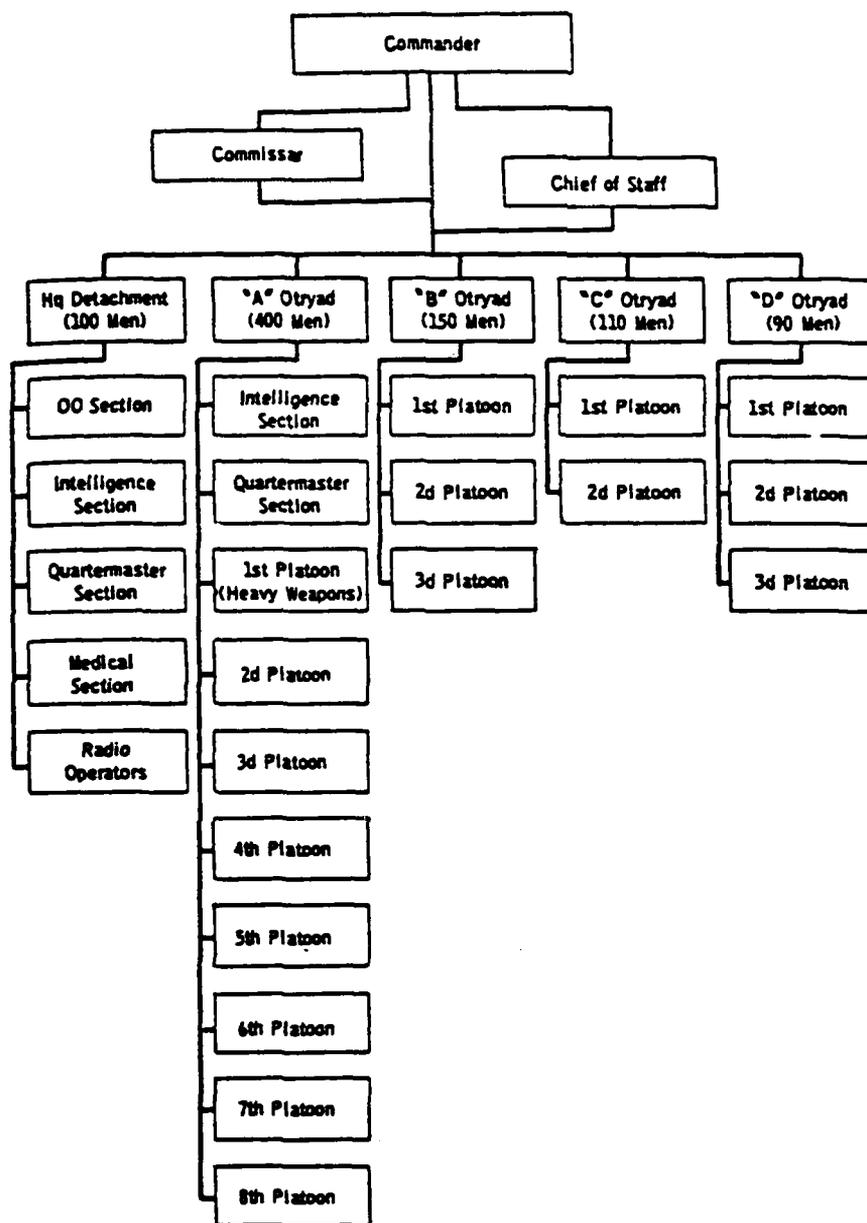
The nature of partisan control took on a tripartite character. First, military officers served down to squad level. Second, political commissars served in company size and larger units. Third, the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) had representatives at regimental and higher level, and at times its personnel served at battalion level. In all three cases, the individuals reported to and received instructions from their higher headquarters.⁴²

While control of partisan operations and enhanced effectiveness were the legacy of phase two, phase three was the period of mature partisan action. Beginning in the autumn of 1942 and continuing until the end of the war, this phase was characterized by an increased number of civilians in the partisan ranks (as German counteractions against partisans took their toll on the original groups of Red Army stragglers), an even greater level of popular support (as citizens realized the inevitable return of Soviet rule and the Germans began forced exportation of civilians to the

west for industrial labor), and better control of partisan operations.⁴³ By late summer of 1942 there were few bands of strength less than 350; any smaller groups were likely to be specialized. Very few brigades were over 2000 in strength due to the vulnerability of large groups to attack and the dearth of capable commanders. The restriction on size was also a conscious decision by Soviet leadership.⁴⁴ Too large a partisan unit gave its leaders too great an implement of influence.

Larger units tended to absorb others. Staffs included logistic, intelligence, and NKVD sections. Brigades had a chief of staff, often a Red Army officer who planned operations and influenced the organization.⁴⁵ A generalized structure of a partisan brigade with otryads (detachments, the basic unit level) is shown at Figure 1.⁴⁶ Later in the war, separate detachments, battalions, and brigades were often loosely organized into "complexes" of up to 15,000 partisans.

The Central Staff in Moscow, republic and oblast (county) staffs of the partisan movement retained responsibility for unit organization, supervision of unit leadership, and cooperation of partisan units with regular army units.⁴⁷ Improvements in this last area were especially notable in phase three. The same control which ensured political compliance facilitated central direction of partisan-Red Army operations. The number of partisan



Sketch 1: Generalized Structure of a Partisan Brigade

Source Document: Soviet Partisans in World War II. Ed. John A. Armstrong. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964, p. 99.

units having radio communication with higher headquarters reached 90%. Exchange of intelligence was routine. Improved supply from Soviet sources allowed assignment of more complex missions. Coordination of partisan and regular army operations became more sophisticated.⁴⁸ Partisans could now strike German vulnerabilities and critical points as a truly effective implement of warfare.

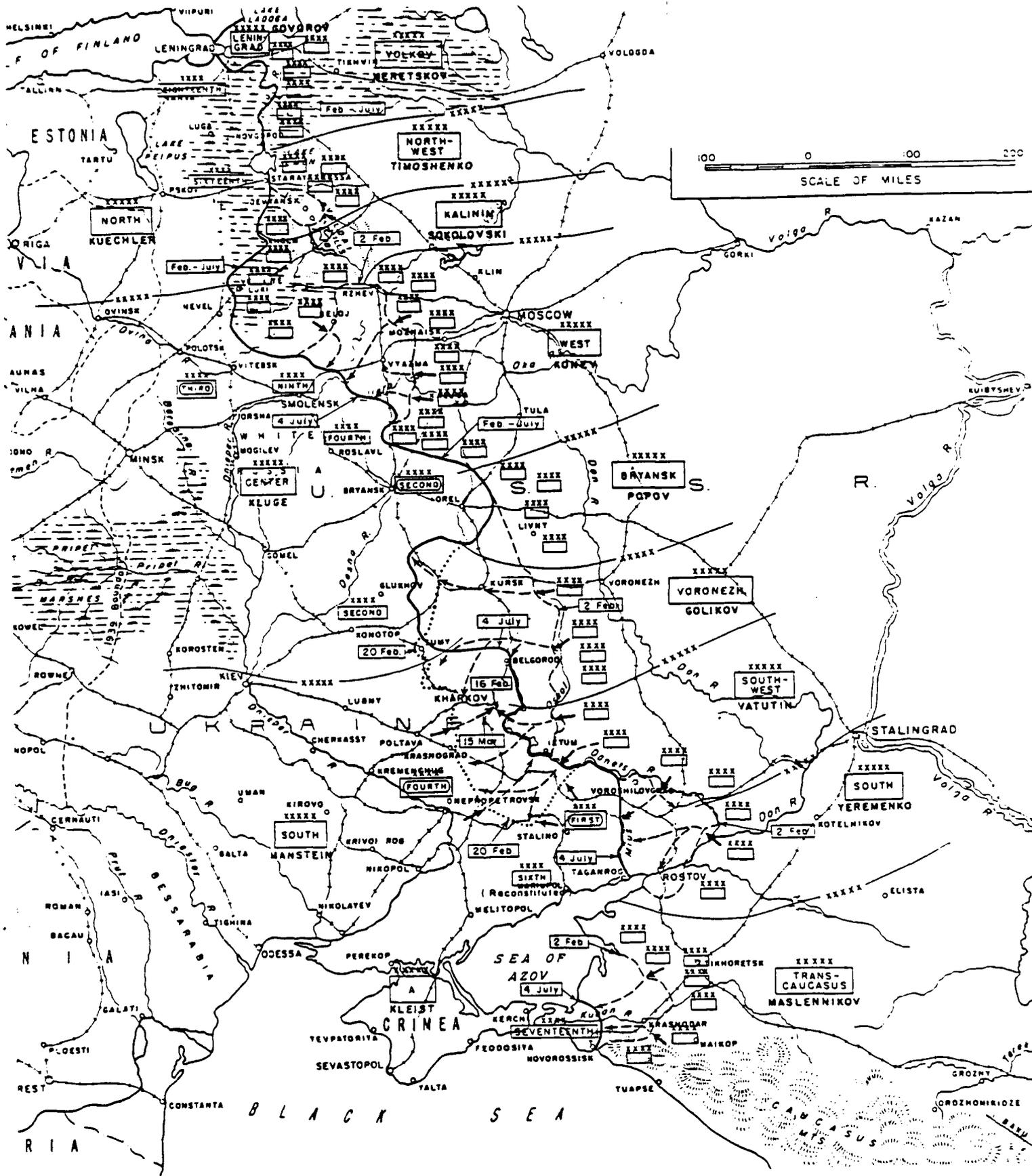
While the most dramatic short term effect of the partisan actions was military, the long term impact was predominantly political. Nearly 40%, or 70 million, of Soviet citizens lived in areas occupied by the Germans during World War II.⁴⁹ Partisans were directed to ensure these people did not collaborate with the enemy and that they were constantly reminded that Soviet influence still extended to their homelands.⁵⁰ Cadre were carefully selected for political reliability and partisan bands themselves were subjected to intense pro-Soviet propaganda. The risks involved in using the partisans were never forgotten by Moscow, however. Units were quickly disbanded or absorbed by regular army units as partisan organizations were overrun by the returning Red Army.⁵¹

Cooperation between partisan units and those of the regular army during major operations effectively began with the Kursk operation (July-August, 1943). Selected portions of railroad track behind enemy lines were designated for demolition with Directive #006 of July 17, 1943. Demolition

operations were to commence at the command of the Central Staff with the objective of fixing the Second Panzer and Ninth Armies forward in the Orel bulge (see center of Map 1). Large quantities of explosives were flown in for execution of rail targets, and orders were given for continued operations after the original series of demolitions. In late July, 1943, partisans completed 10,000 demolitions on rail lines. However, the effectiveness of "the rail war" was limited. Railroads were not completely cut. Partisan efforts were too widely dispersed and follow-up operations were never executed. Many lines that were disrupted were secondary routes while primary routes did not sustain enough damage to halt transit.⁵²

Yet the partisans' tasks encompassed more than simply road and rail disruption. Partisans secured a total of 25 crossings over the Desna, Dnieper, and Pripyat (spelled Pripet on Map 1) Rivers for Red Army use during the Soviet counteroffensive at Kursk. Actions at times were directly coordinated between partisans and Red Army units at regiment and higher levels. Partisans led units to the crossing sites and pointed out enemy gun positions. Each company in some locations had a partisan group accompanying it.⁵³

Thus while the rail demolitions were not as successful as had been hoped, the partisans had provided key assistance to regular units in the Kursk operation. They had secured river crossing sites before the Germans could strengthen



Map 1: Soviet-German Front Line Trace, 4 July 1943

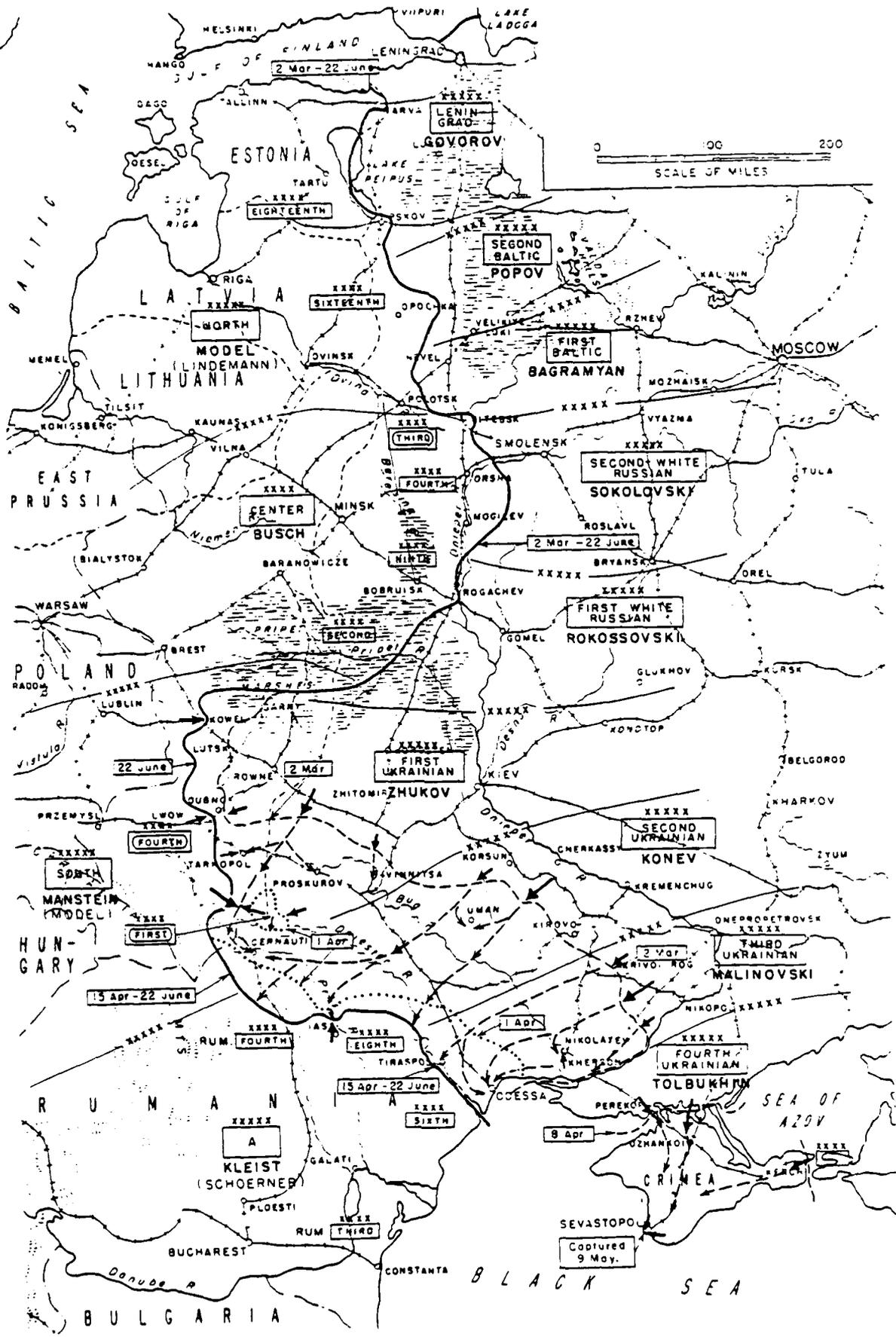
Source Document: The West Point Atlas of American Wars.
 Vol II. Ed. Vincent J. Esposito. New York: Praeger
 Publishers.

river defenses and had then guided arriving Soviet units over the rivers to hasten their advance. They thus hastened the collapse of the German defenses while reducing Soviet losses due to unnecessary contact. The partisans abetted the shattering of the German center of gravity and postponed the Soviet culminating point by reducing unnecessary contact with enemy forces.

Prelude to Operation Bagration

The remainder of this analysis focuses on partisan operations in Belorussia, particularly those in support of Operation Bagration (June-August, 1944). The operation itself is described following a review of the strategic and operational situation. Particular attention is paid to the actions of the 65th Army in the south as the analysis incorporates a detailed look at the integration of partisan and 65th Army operations.⁵⁴

The Soviet spring, 1944 offensive secured the liberation of most of the Ukraine. The 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Ukrainian Fronts were on the Romanian border by late April and early May, but there the offensive slowed to a halt.⁵⁵ Soviet units were posed within striking distance of Lvov (spelled Lwow on Map 2) and Lublin⁵⁶ (see left center of Map 2). At this point the Soviet high command considered three



Map 2: Soviet-German Front Line Trace, 22 June 1944

Source Document: The West Point Atlas of American Wars.
 Vol II. Ed. Vincent J. Esposito. New York: Praeger
 Publishers.

primary options for the major effort in the summer of that year.⁵⁷

First, the offensive in the Ukraine could continue into the Balkans. The Red Army had all five of its tank armies in the vicinity, but such an offensive would leave a large number of German units on the strategic flank to the north. Additionally, the Soviet and German forces in the region were roughly equivalent and therefore the force ratio was not conducive to further offensive operations.⁵⁸

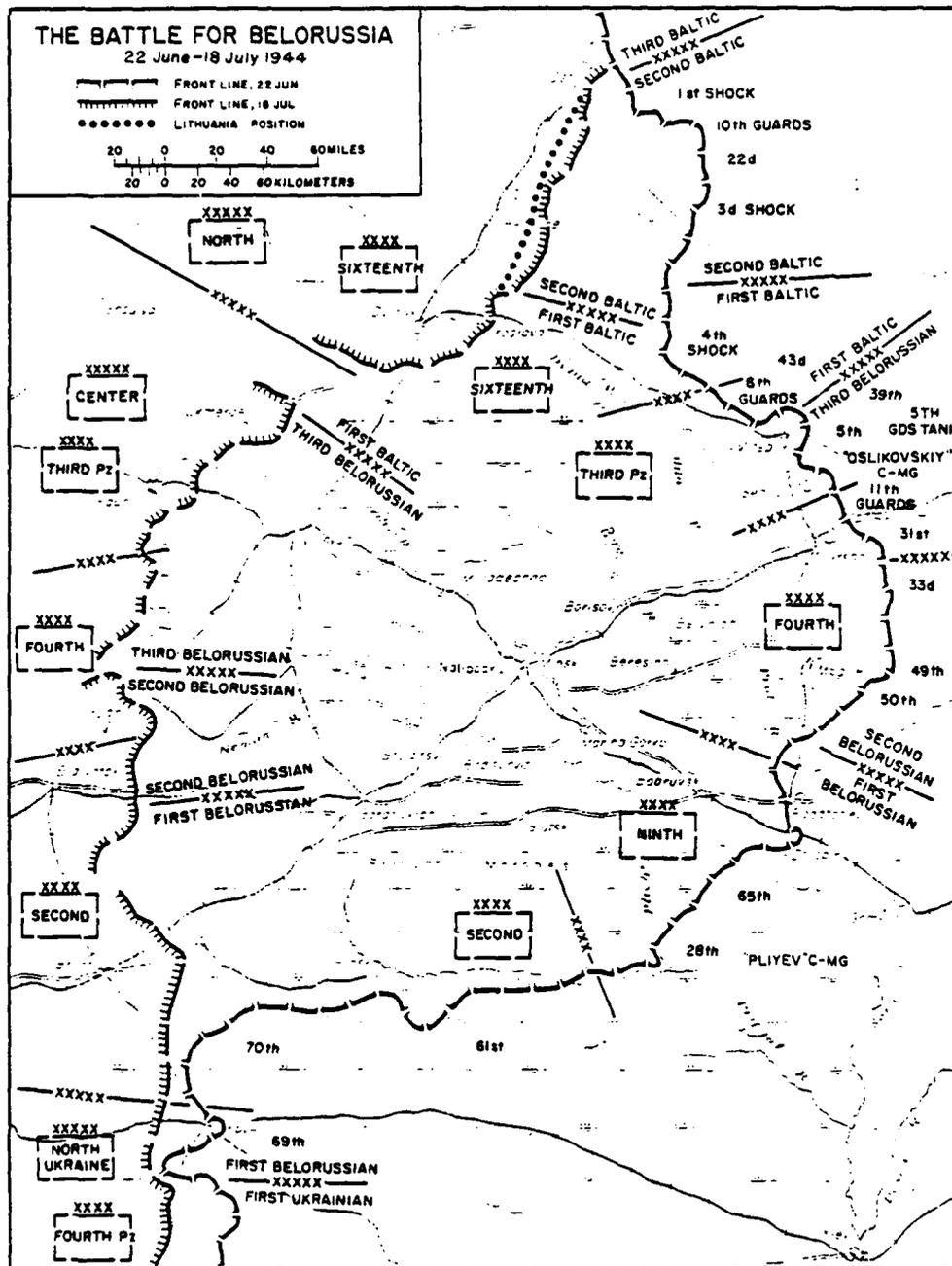
The second option was extremely bold in concept. Large tank formations in the northern Ukraine would strike deep to the Vistula and north to the Baltic Sea, encircling both Army Groups Center and North. This was a major strategic maneuver. STAVKA, however, believed that the Red Army was just reaching the point where it could conduct successful operational maneuver. Here again there would also be a large force on the eastern flank which could strike the attacking force, even with the Pripjat marshes protecting a large part of that flank.⁵⁹

The third option, that which was adopted, was a Belorussian operation which would destroy Army Group Center. While more conservative than the second alternative, this offensive would provide a springboard into East Prussia⁶⁰ or into the flanks and rear of those forces now blocking the way to Lvov and Hungary. Success by the Red Army would also move Soviet forces toward the borders of Germany by the most

direct route.⁸¹ Additionally, Moscow was still within range of German bombers based in Belorussia. The road and rail network had been well-developed by Soviet units in the area during the previous winter and spring.⁸² Finally, the partisan strength of approximately 140,000 behind the German lines, with whole districts controlled by these forces, favored operations in the area.⁸³

The German lines of communications (LOCs) were well-developed between the cities of Minsk, Vilnius, and Brest, and good north-south LOCs ran between Molodechno, Minsk, and Baranovichi (see Map 3). The area was heavily wooded which had caused problems for the Soviets during earlier fighting from Moscow to Smolensk in late 1942 to late the following year. STAVKA therefore decided to use only one tank army (the 5th Guards) in Bagration.⁸⁴ Two armies were also moved from the Crimea as strategic reserves, the 51st Army to Gomel (in the lower right of Map 3) and the 2nd Guards Army to Yartsevo (off the map to the right of Orsha).⁸⁵

Geography influenced the planning of operational objectives. The phases of the operation were generally outlined by the achievement of the following objective lines:



Map 3: Operation Bagration: Front Line Traces, 22 June and 18 July 1944 (NOTE: Spellings of rivers and towns in the text may differ from those on maps. Locations not found on either Maps 3 or 4 are on the map in Annex A unless otherwise noted.)

Source Document: Rear Area Security in Russia: The Soviet Second Front Behind the German Lines. Office of the Chief of Military History Special Staff, U.S. Army, July, 1950. p. 49.

Phase 1 : Vitebsk, Orsha, Mogilev, Bobruisk

Phase 2 : Berezina River

Phase 3 : Minsk

Phase 4 : Key corridors for roads and rails, to include Molodechno and the Molodechno gap and the Baranovichi gap with the city of Stolbtsy.⁸⁸

The total frontage was approximately 1000 kilometers. The southern portion passed through the Pripyat marshes, which were unsuitable for large scale armor or mechanized operations.⁸⁷ Moving north along the front, the terrain from the Berezina River north to Bykhov (not shown on Map 3; see Map 4 following page 25) was heavily wooded with the exception of narrow strips directly south of the Berezina and along the Zhlobin-Rogatchev-Bobruisk line where armor could operate. Only the Prut River was a serious obstacle in this area. From Bykhov to Orsha the ground was solid, hilly, partially wooded and easily passable. Between Orsha and Vitebsk the terrain was open and the ground firm, good for large scale operations with tank and mechanized forces.⁸⁸

The German front lines in June, 1944 were less a matter of choice than the result of where Army Group Center fighting had stopped during battles the previous winter and spring. Field positions were poor, often little more than fundamental entrenchments. There was a general lack of building materials, mines, and no tactical wire.⁸⁸ There

were no alternative or secondary positions; defenses⁷⁰ therefore suffered a lack of depth. The dearth of such improvements when the Germans had been in the area for the better part of a year is difficult to explain. In part it was due to manpower shortages. Soldiers not in forward positions were often engaged in anti-partisan operations rather than building positions.⁷¹

The Soviets had gone over to the tactical defense at the direction of the STAVKA on April 17, 1944 in preparation for the coming offensive.⁷² Their objectives for the summer offensive were

1. the liberation of Belorussia,
2. the destruction of Army Group Center,
3. the liberation of other European nations, and
4. to conduct operations sequentially rather than simultaneously.

The German objectives for this period were

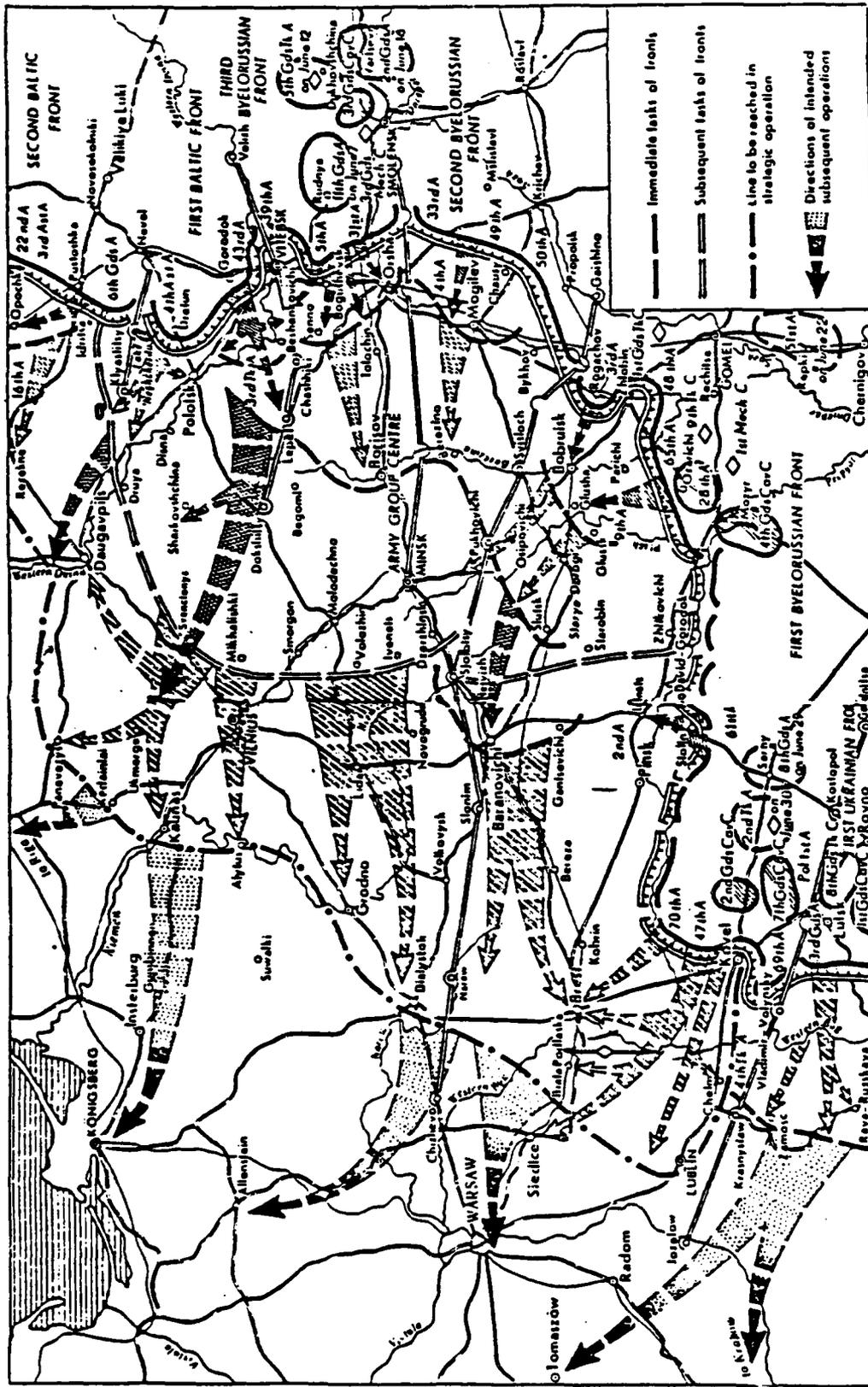
1. the defeat of Allied landings in France,
2. to win time for the Allied coalition to disintegrate,
3. successful defense in the east with the forces in that theater,
4. defeat of the expected Soviet summer offensive in the Ukraine with mobile reserves, and
5. the holding of the Italian front.⁷³

In spite of extensive Soviet deception measures, the Germans knew an offensive against Army Group Center was pending.⁷⁴ However, they did not know its magnitude, the location of its main effort, nor its exact timing. The

Soviets were planning near simultaneous blows to crush forces around Vitebsk and Bobruisk and to destroy Germans in the vicinity of Mogilev. The early attainment of these objectives would give the Red Army the road to Minsk. They could then sever the German escape route west of Minsk, entrap Army Group Center, and destroy its remnants piecemeal with air, partisan operations, and actions by three Red Army fronts. The 2nd Belorussian Front was making a supporting attack to pin forces which could interfere with the efforts of the 1st and 3rd Belorussian Fronts. The 3rd Belorussian Front was given the 5th Guards Tank Army.⁷⁵

Front objectives were kept shallower than in previous operations so as not to overextend units as had occurred at Kharkov.⁷⁶ The immediate objectives of the 4 fronts were the seizure of Vitebsk, Orsha, Mogilev and Bobruisk (see Map 4). Based on previous operations, the Soviets believed the main German strength was in the tactical zone.⁷⁷ An effective strike to take these original objectives would lead to destruction of the main portion of German combat power. Subsequent objectives ran along a line Polotsk-Lepel-Borisov-Slutsk-Baranovichi. Further objectives were not specified. In fact, STAVKA planned much of the operation after having seen how the opening phases progressed.⁷⁸

Partisan activity in Belorussia had been evident as early as July 5, 1941. As in the remainder of the occupied



Map 4: Operation Bagration

Source Document: Shtemenko, S.M. The Soviet General Staff at War, 1941-1945. Book 1. Trans. Robert Daglish. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1981, p. 308-309.

Soviet Union, pre-1942 partisan activities were of little consequence. Prior to the Soviet initiation of their summer offensive on June 23, 1944, partisan strength in Belorussia was approximately 140,000 in 150 brigades and 49 separate detachments;⁷⁹ it "in essence was a fifth cooperating front the efforts of which together with the troops of the First, Second, and Third Belorussian and First Baltic Fronts were aimed at achieving a single goal."⁸⁰ The Belorussian partisan strength of 140,000 was approximately 90% of all partisans in the Soviet Union.⁸¹

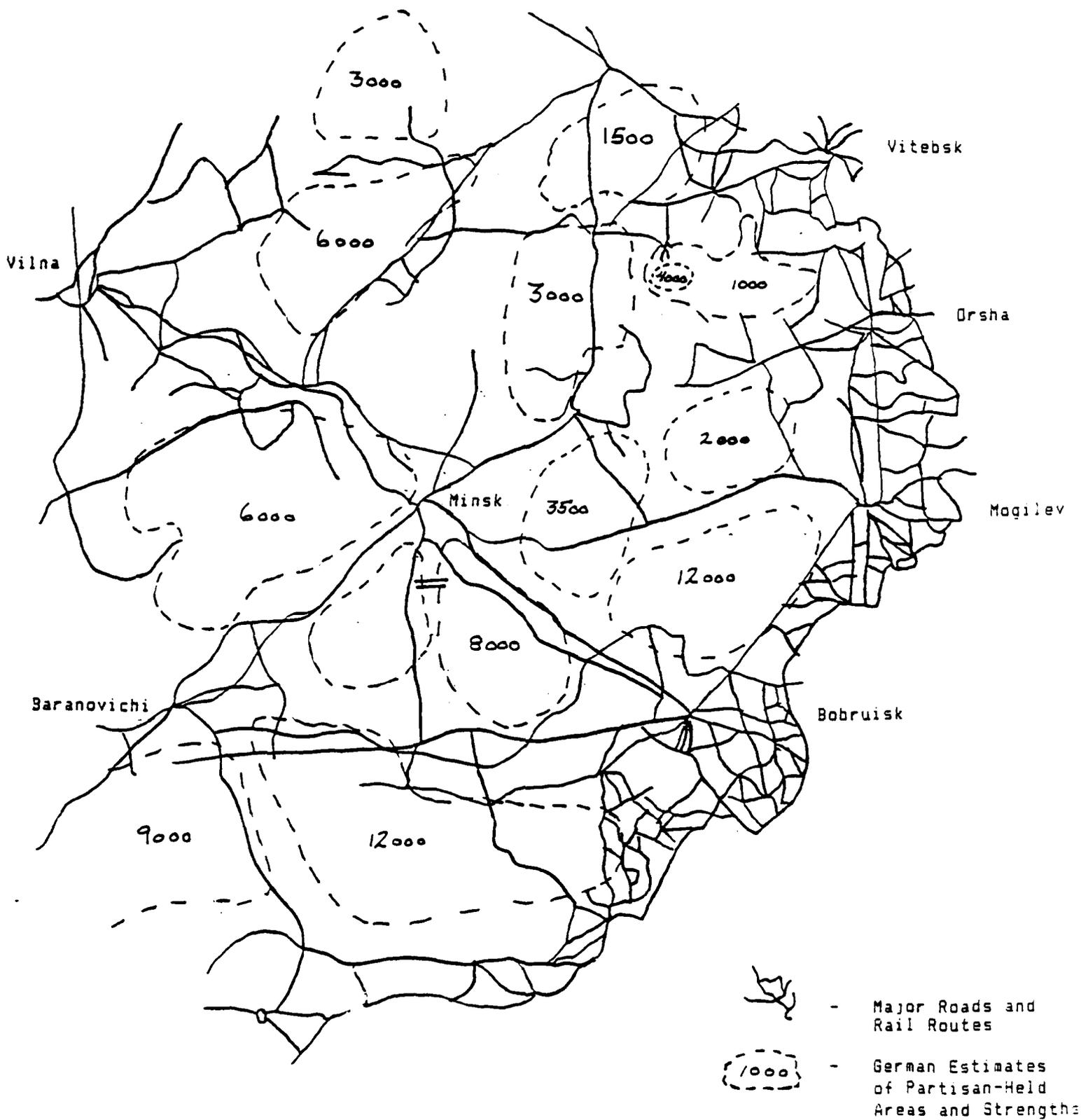
The Germans did not allow these partisans free reign. Army Group Center had initiated the first of what would be nineteen anti-partisan operations in August, 1942. Operations Donnerkeil and Maigewitter in the summer of 1943 had captured partisan food supplies and had led to such hunger that Marshal Ponomarenko had food flown to the suffering units.⁸² Operations of this nature in 1944 included Eruehlingsfest, Regenschauer, and Kormoran, the last of which was interrupted by Operation Bagration. The objectives of these operations were the securing of LOCs and the weakening of partisan ability to attack roads or installations.⁸⁴ They were effective in temporarily reducing partisan actions and in causing reorganization where units were especially hard hit. In particular, Operation Eruehlingsfest resulted in as many First Belorussian Brigade partisans being killed in May, 1944 as

in the previous 13 months combined.⁸⁵ Thus the partisans had suffered serious, although not fatal, blows just prior to Operation Bagration. German estimates of partisan-controlled locations and their strengths in June, 1944 are shown in Map 5.

In June, 1944 the Central Committee of the Belorussian Communist Party established targets for partisan execution in the enemy rear. The first attacks were to occur on the night of 19-20 June and units were thereafter to "subsequently carry out continuous sabotage on the railroads and highways, achieving the complete stopping of enemy movement." Partisan staffs delineated brigade areas of responsibility and brigades specified portions of roads or rail for demolition by detachments. The partisan operations for Operation Bagration

were carefully planned not as a series of isolated blows but as an integrated whole fitted far more closely into the over-all battle picture than in previous campaigns.

This was the plan. They were to hold tightly to their newly aligned areas in the face of all attacks, all the while strengthening them, until the Red Army struck the Dnieper line in a general offensive. Then, after making the Germans' withdrawal on a broad front slow and difficult, they were to split the front and drive the Germans into the narrow corridors along the roads and railroads now dominated by the concentration areas where they might be blocked or successively checked until destroyed from the east.⁸⁶



Map 5: German Estimates of Partisan Locations and Strengths in June, 1944 prior to Operation Bagration

Source Document: Army Group Center Intelligence Report, June, 1944.

Soviet Victory: Operation Bagration

On the night of June 19-20, 1944, partisans exploded 10,000 demolition charges along LOCs behind Army Group Center. In the words of one German officer,

As an immediate result all double-track lines were blocked for a period of twenty-four hours, while the operation of single-track lines was interrupted for over forty-eight hours. This was another example that demonstrated the excellent co-ordination between the Russian combat forces and partisan headquarters behind the German lines.⁸⁷

Damage to the Vitebsk-Orsha and Polotsk-Molodechno rail lines was heavy. The Minsk-Brest-Pinsk line, a primary route for expected movement of reinforcements, was also badly damaged.⁸⁸

The northern Red Army attacks were started on June 22, 1944 by reconnaissance units of the 1st Baltic and 2nd and 3rd Belorussian Fronts. These efforts were so successful that they were expanded into the offensive proper in the 43rd and 6th Guards Army sectors.⁸⁹ The 1st Baltic and 3rd Belorussian Fronts made two attacks as the main effort in the north, one north of Vitebsk, the other south of that city. These northern fronts also attacked along the Orsha-Tolochin-Borisov axis.⁹⁰ The 2nd Belorussian Front executed a secondary attack frontally at Mogilev on June 23rd, while the southern portion of the main effort was

launched by the 1st Belorussian Front in the south.⁸¹ The southern attacks went forward on June 24th with the 3rd Army and 2 additional corps of the 48th Army attacking north of Rogatchev. South of Bobruisk the other pincer of this attack was executed by the 65th and 28th Armies.⁸²

On the night of June 19-20, partisans of the Minsk and Polesye formations had struck in the area forward of the 65th Army. Targets included the road Bobruisk-Glusk-Lyuban and the Slutsk-Osipovichi railroad, key routes for reinforcement or withdrawal of German Ninth Army units. As Operation Bagration commenced on June 24th for the 65th Army, its staff radioed additional tasks to the partisans: capture crossings over the Ptich and Sluch Rivers (the latter not on maps), prevent the shifting of reserves and act to otherwise contribute to the Red Army offensive. Partisans were to secure deep objectives to hasten the advance of the southern pincer while closing escape routes for the Germans. Roads to Bobruisk were cut. The partisans continued with demolition activities, executed ambushes, hindered the enemy retreat, seized assigned river crossings, and attacked small German units and staffs. Elements of 4 brigades from the Minsk formation secured crossing sites over the Ptich River and collected 40 boats for use by the 48th Guards Rifle Division. Detachments of two other partisan brigades secured crossings over the Sluch River near Starobin and fought successfully to hold them for two

days before turning them over to the 193rd and 44th Guards Rifle Divisions. Partisans sent guides out to these units to direct them to the secured crossing sites. Other detachments worked directly with regular army divisions to capture the towns of Starye Dorogi and Osipovichy.

By June 24th, the encirclement of Vitebsk was already well underway. Much of the attack north of Bobruisk was going slowly, but that to the south of the city made significant advances the first day.⁸³ The mission of the 65th Army in the opening days of Operation Bagration was to attack in conjunction with the 28th Army along the western bank of the Berezina River. This southern pincer was to encircle Bobruisk and destroy the Ninth German Army there. By the end of June 24 (D-Day for the attack in the south), this attack had advanced from 5 to 10 kilometers in depth along 30 kilometers of front;⁸⁴ by the end of the following day it was moving toward Glusk on the Ptich River.

The Germans were doomed by their policy of Fester Platz (center of resistance) which had been started in 1943.⁸⁵ Points near the front were designated as locations where forces were to allow themselves to be surrounded and then were to fight until subsequent relief or they were overrun. The goal was to break the momentum of the Soviet attack, interfere with LOCs, and tie down enemy forces. The problem was that the Germans rarely had sufficient forces to relieve the surrounded units. As these

locations were storage points for supplies and munitions needed to withstand lengthy siege, their loss was doubly catastrophic as both units and material were sacrificed.⁹⁶ For Army Group Center in the summer of 1944, the following were among the designated centers of resistance:

Close to the front: Bobruisk, Mogilev, Orsha, Vitebsk
Further to the rear: Slutsk, Minsk, Baranovichi,
Vilnius, Pinsk.⁹⁷

Five to six divisions were lost in the forward centers of resistance. Most units were evacuated from the rear towns in contradiction to orders but with "silent tolerance" from the High Command.⁹⁸

The first phase of the operation was over one week after the initiation of Operation Bagration. Vitebsk, Orsha, Mogilev and Bobruisk and fallen and the German center was broken. Three German armies had been lost with 130,000 killed, 66,000 prisoners taken and 900 tanks and thousands of other vehicles out of action.⁹⁹ Bobruisk was nearly encircled with 70,000 Germans in the sack.¹⁰⁰ By June 30th, the Red Army was trying to cut the LOCs from Vilnius to Minsk and encircle the 4th German Army as it withdrew to the Berezina River.¹⁰¹ The 9th Army had only 3 to 4 battered divisions remaining.¹⁰² On July 3rd, 105,000 men of the 4th German Army were encircled. Forty thousand of these would die before the reduction of the pockets and termination of attempts to escape.¹⁰³

As German resistance collapsed, the partisans continued closely integrated operations with the 65th Army. In July the 65th Army advanced west while partisans from the Baranovichi Oblast interdicted the Dzerzhinsk-Stolbtsy-Mir-Korelichi highway, blocking the escape of Germans to Novogradok. These trapped enemy units were later defeated by the 15th and 37th Guards Rifle Divisions. Partisans rebuilt bridges and cleared routes of rubble and mines as units of the 65th Army advanced toward Baranovichi. During the subsequent army movement toward Brest and Bialystok, the army staff radioed instructions ahead to local partisan units with specific assignments to support the advance. This support continued as far west as the Western Bug, with partisans routing hiding Germans from forests¹⁰⁴ and guiding Red units to the best crossing points over the river.

Soviet armies continued to move west. German movement back to the Grodno-Bialystok area was "continuously interrupted by partisan activities" along the only available east-west routes.¹⁰⁵ By July 16th Red Army tank units were exhausted and had to be pulled out of the attack.¹⁰⁶ The subsequent phase of the operation was characterized by a slow, broad front,¹⁰⁷ infantry advance. With a series of counterattacks, some quite successful, the Germans halted the Bagration offensive in late August.¹⁰⁸ The Germans had been pushed back to the Vistula and East Prussian frontier.¹⁰⁹

Most partisans had been integrated into the Red Army by the conclusion of operations in Belorussia. Others had been assigned to party, economic, or regional positions. Some continued to function in a partisan role during operations in Poland. In coordinating their actions with the 65th Army, partisans had helped unbalance the enemy center of gravity through attacks on his vulnerabilities and critical points: his lines of reinforcement and supply and his command and control nodes. They had facilitated the collapse of Army Group Center by attacking moral and supply much as had their partisan predecessors in Siberia 30 years before. The partisans had also acted to extend the time before Red Army units reached their offensive culminating point by guiding them away from strong defensive positions, by securing river crossings they otherwise would have had to win in combat, and by guiding them on the shortest routes to objectives. The partisans in Operation Bagration were integral to the force that crushed Army Group Center.

Conclusions

By the summer of 1944, partisans were an effective component of Soviet warfare. In the Soviet logic of the dialectic, they complemented other means which were unified to facilitate military and political victory. Irregular warfare units acted in coordination with other forces to execute tasks which assisted in the unbalancing and

shattering of the enemy center of gravity. The partisans facilitated this unbalancing by striking at vulnerabilities and critical points such as transportation infrastructure and command and control nodes.

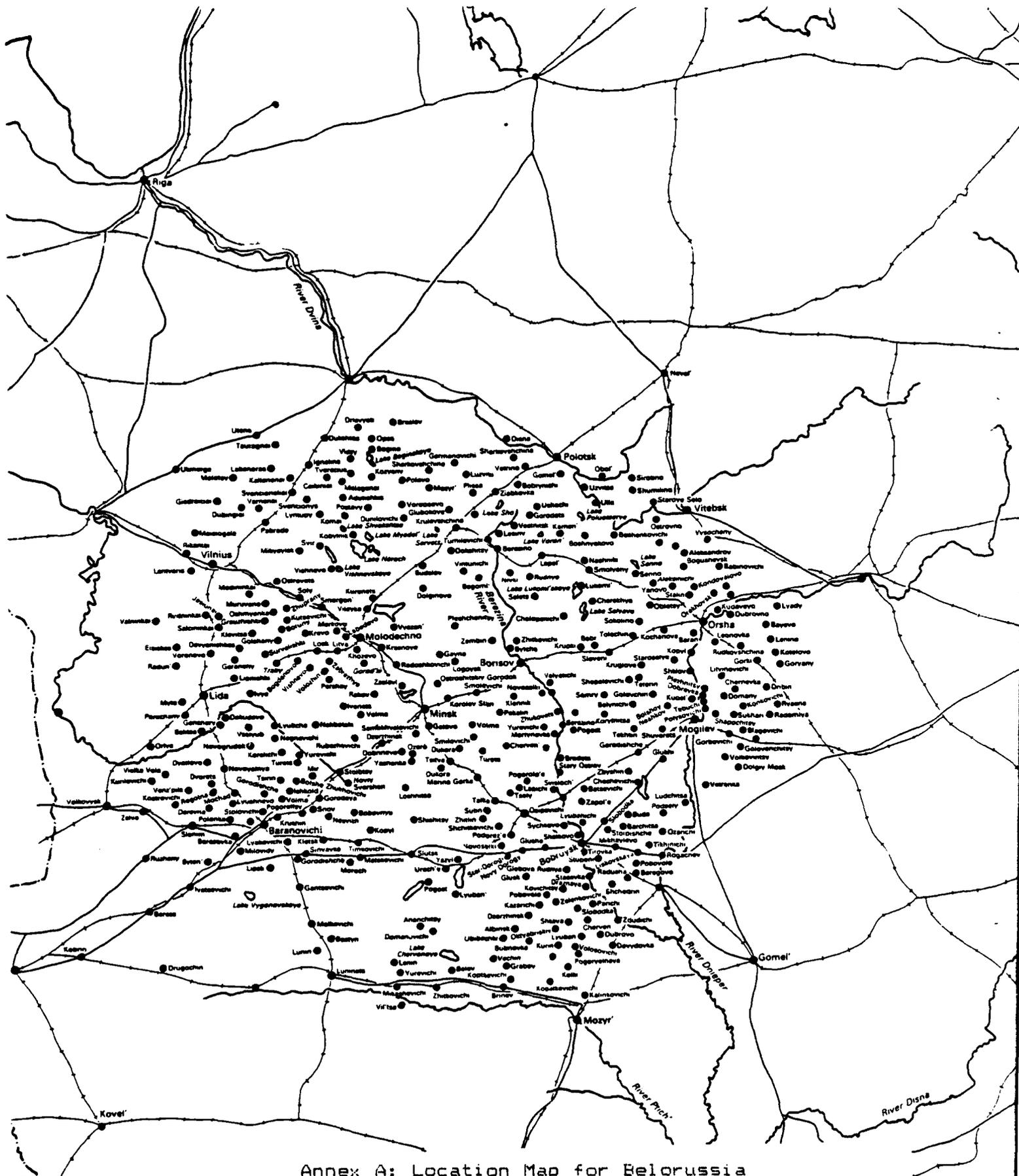
Partisans abetted success indirectly in addition to this direct support of regular operations. German and indigenous security units dedicated to rear area protection deprived the Axis industrial base of tens of thousands of potential laborers. Accurate and detailed intelligence facilitated planning and execution of operations and battles. The Soviet culminating point, reached with devastatingly negative effect at Kharkov in 1943, was delayed as partisans directed Red Army units through gaps in enemy defenses or themselves secured key terrain. Perhaps most importantly, partisans maintained political homogeneity in those areas occupied by the enemy from 1941-1943.

The effectiveness of Soviet partisans in World War II was facilitated by centralized control. This control was key to ensuring ideological continuity in occupied territories and in minimizing the risk of partisan forces acting against the state upon the return of the Red Army. Only with this control would integration of regular and partisan operations at the level and scale executed in the summer of 1944 have been possible.

The Soviets learn from their history. Spetsnaz, airmobile, and airborne forces provide the deep attack

capability partisans offered in the Second World War. Members of these units are selected for political reliability; their missions are similar to those assigned partisans in World War II. Much as the partisans helped to buy time against the superior technology and strength of the Wehrmacht in 1941, Soviet-trained third world partisans have been and will continue to complement regular forces in future conflicts. As is stated in United States Department of the Army Pamphlet 20-244, The Soviet Partisan Movement:

The Soviet Partisan Movement which was established in the wake of the German armies invading the USSR in 1941 was, in both conception and scope, the greatest irregular resistance movement in the history of warfare. It combined all the classic elements of resistance movements of the past with modern means of communication and transportation and modern weapons, and at its peak involved a far greater number of men than had ever before been drawn into an irregular force. The modern military planner should study both the Soviet experience in organizing and utilizing the partisan movement and the German experience in combating it if he is preparing an operational campaign and its logistical support or an occupation of conquered territory.¹¹⁰



Annex A: Location Map for Belorussia

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