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THE BATTLE OF KURSK
AN ANALYSIS OF STRATEGIC AND OPERATIONAL PRINCIPLES

BY

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The Battle of Kursk

An Analysis of Strategic and Operational Principles

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This paper begins with an analysis of Field Marshal von Manstein's counterstroke at Kharkov – the prelude of Kursk – in February/March 1943. Kharkov serves as an outstanding example of a battle in which principles of war were masterly applied.

This battle the serves as a yardstick for analyzing the battle of Kursk, a battle where Hitler rather than Manstein dominated operations. In the east Manstein's strategic objective was to reach a separate political settlement with the Soviets in 1943. Operations like his counterstroke were the way towards this end. His ideas, however, failed because of Hitler's resistance. Beside the potential strategic consequences of counterstroke-like operations, the example of Kharkov shows on the operational level how an Army can succeed, even when badly outnumbered.

In contrast, planning, the conduct of operations and outcome of the battle of Kursk shows, that a viable strategic objective, like Manstein envisioned, could not be achieved, even if the battle had been successfully concluded. For that very reason Kursk was not a decisive battle. In addition, Kursk shows the neglect of basic principles of warfare by the German supreme command. Studying the battle of Kursk or comparing Kursk to Kharkov shows a student of military affairs how through inappropriate strategy and ignoring basic principles of war only poor results can be produced.

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Introduction and Acknowledgements

Since the details of the 1943 German/Soviet engagement at Kursk became known to the American military studies community, Kursk the massive battle between two military giants, has held a tremendous fascination for the American, and for that matter, the British Army. What has been overlooked through the emphasis on studying Kursk is the counterstroke at Kharkov. This operation has been the subject of intensive studies in the training of German officers and is linked to Kursk with the two battles serving as an excellent example of modern warfare, as demonstrated on the eastern front. It is particularly worthwhile to study Kharkov as an example of Manstein's operational thinking.

I was provided an excellent opportunity to sharpen my thoughts on this issue at a lecture concerning this topic at the "Truppenfuehrerreise des Heeres"[1] in Strausberg by Berlin in January 1999. It was a very stimulating lecture by Colonel Friedhelm Klein and Lieutenant Colonel Karl-Heinz Frieser from the German Military Institute.[2] They were kind enough to provide me with their material including the slides from their presentation for my upcoming studies at the U.S. Army War College. Thus, many of the ideas expressed in this research project can be traced to this lecture. Many graphics, with their permission are included in the annex.

In addition to the presentation in 1999, the Warfighting Studies Program at the U.S. War College convinced me finally to undertake this project. There are many new studies on this topic, which include the latest Russian sources that have become available with the opening of the Soviet archives. The battle of Kursk or "Operation Zitadelle" - the German name, when coupled with Kharkov and using contemporary sources, provides a fresh and different perspective on the battle and Manstein's genius. My project is primarily based on German sources. For this reason it reflects mainly the German perspective.

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[1] The "Truppenfuehrerreise" was lead by the Chief of Staff of the Army and included all commanders of the German Army from brigade level and above.

Historical, Strategic and Operational Setting

The war against the Soviet Union was the key campaign that Hitler wanted most to wage. It was a war, for him, almost a crusade, which had virtually limitless objectives. With his attack in the east he wanted to conquer land for German expansion to the east (Lebensraum) and by seizing this land he wanted to solve once and for all the German problem of access to critical resources. In addition, he wanted to destroy Jewish bolshevism, Communism, at its very roots. Moreover, he was convinced, that according to Darwin the fight for survival not only applied to the individual but also to entire peoples. The Germans could only succeed in this struggle if they dominated all of Europe from the Atlantic coast to the Ural Mountains. "The fight for hegemony in the world will be decided for Europe by the possession of the Russian space: it makes Europe the most blockade-resistant place in the world."[3] Germany will either become a world power or it will cease to exist.[4]

In the summer of 1940 Hitler decided to attack the Soviet Union, even though this decision meant he would have to fight a two front war. Together with the above mentioned objectives he wanted to secure the German sphere of influence against the increasing challenge of the Anglo-Saxon seapowers. President Roosevelt's clear and hostile statement on July 19, 1940 moved the United States into the center of Hitler's strategy.[5] If he wanted to maintain the initiative and prepare Germany for the American challenge in the long run, only one way was left according to his dogma 'all or nothing'. The German 'Reich' had to defeat, as quickly as possible, the only remaining power on

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[2] In German: Militaergeschichtliches Forschungsamt

[3] Adolf Hitler, Monologe im Fuehrerhauptquartier 1941 - 1944. Die Aufzeichungen von Heinrich Heims, edited by Werner Jochmann (Hamburg 1980), 62

[4] Adolf Hitler, Mein Kampf (Muenchen 1936), 742; Himmler varied this alternative on 8 November 1928: "Either the Great German Empire or nothing", Heinrich Himmler, Geheimreden 1933 bis 1945 und andere Ansprachen, edited by Bradley F. Smith and Agnes F. Peterson with an introduction of Joachim C. Fest (Frankfurt/Main, Berlin, Wien 1974), 49

[5] The American president had backed Churchill's line in no uncertain terms and prepared the American nation for the unavoidable conflict with the Axis powers.

the continent.[6] In addition the Germans had information that the Red Army was developing into a modern force, that would soon be able to conduct offensive operations against the 'Reich' on a great scale.[7]

For Hitler and the German Armed Forces - the Wehrmacht - it was clearly decisive to defeat the Soviet Union quickly. "The faster we destroy Russia the better. The operation makes only sense, if we decisively destroy [the] state in one move."[8] One crucial condition for the campaign was to defeat the Red Army before the beginning of the winter 1941.

Instead of attacking at the earliest possible time (immediately after the spring mud period), the campaign did not begin until June 22,1941. The attack was delayed due to the Wehrmacht's Balkan campaign[9], a last minute contingency forced on Germany by Italian military failures in that region. This necessitated a German move to secure that flank. The Balkan campaign was necessary due to the lack of a systematic approach on the part of the Axis powers in developing a military strategy. They simply found it impossible to develop a common strategy.[10] As a rule, decisions by each nation state were not passed on to their ally before they were implemented.[11] Thus, Italy attacked Greece on 28 October 1940 without consulting Germany. The Greek adventure almost became a catastrophe for the Italians. The Germans were obliged to

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6 Horst Boog, Juergen Foerster, Joachim Hoffmann, Ernst Klink, Rolf-Dieter Mueller, Gerd R. Ueberschaer, Der Angriff auf die Sowjetunion, Band 4 der vom Militaer-Geschichtlichen Forschungsamt herausgegebenen Schriftenreihe 'Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg' (Frankfurt/Main 1991), 40

7 Klaus A. Maier, Horst Rohde, Bernd Stegemann, Hans Umbreit, Die Errichtung der Hegemonie auf dem europaeischen Kontinent, Band 2 der vom Militaergeschicht-Lichen Forschungsamt herausgegebenen Schriftenreihe 'Das Deutsche Reich und Zweite Weltkrieg' (Stuttgart 1979), 33

8 Franz Halder, Kriegstagebuch. Taegliche Aufzeichnungen des Chefs des General-stabes des Heeres 1939 - 1942. 3 Bde, edited by Hans-Adolf Jacobsen and Arbeits-kreis fuer Wehrforschung (Stuttgart 1962 - 1964), Bd. II, 49 (31 July 1940)

9 Boog, Foerster, 319

10 See Bernd Martin, Deutschland und Japan im Zweiten Weltkrieg. Von Pearl Harbour bis zur deutschen Kapitulation (Goettingen 1969)

11 Andreas Hillgruber, "Japan und der Fall Barbarossa," Wehrwissenschaftliche Rund-schau 6, 1968, 312 -336

intervene on behalf of their ally and to prevent a British foothold on the continent. This caused a crucial change in the preparation for 'Barbarossa' - the attack on the Soviet Union.

Once Barbarossa was launched, the German expectations of a quick victory over the Soviet Union were soon shattered when the German attack came to a standstill in front of Moscow in December, 1941. It is here the plan to for a quick defeat of the Soviet Union failed. Without a quick victory, Germany lacked the resources to defeat the Soviet Union. Consequently the German minister of armament, Todt, asked Hitler to seek a political settlement.[12] But this approach was not compatible to Hitler's 'all or nothing' policy. Thus, in 1942 he was again determined "...to bring about the strategic decision in the eastern theater of war."[13] To continue the war, however, the oilfields close to the Caucasus region would have to be captured, as a prerequisite for the continuation. Hitler compromised this logical assumption by an absurd decision to split the offensive in July 1942 into two eccentric and simultaneous operations. His poor knowledge of the intentions and capabilities of the Red Army and the vast distances of the Soviet land space caused this to happen and led to the exhaustion of German forces in the field. German operations in the south, which had the potential to secure the needed oil, instead ended up with the catastrophe of Stalingrad. This defeat meant a definitive turn of the war in the east; beyond which there "was no reasonable hope for victory."[14]

The consequences of Hitler's failure to achieve the necessary quick victory both in 1941 and 1942 were clear to most general officers. Since victory was not achievable, the only remaining question for Field Marshal von Manstein was how to come to a favorable settlement with the Soviet Union before the second front on the continent could be established by the maritime powers, Britain and the United States.[15] Thus, as

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[12] Boog, Foerster, 1203

[13] Horst Boog, Werner Rahn, Reinhard Stumpf, Bernd Wegner, Der globale Krieg. Die zum Weltkrieg und der Wechsel der Initiative 1941 - 1943, Band 6 der vom Militaergeschichtlichen Forschungsamt herausgegebenen Schriftenreihe 'Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg' (Stuttgart 1990), 762

[14] Ibid., 1102

[15] Erich von Manstein, Verlorene Siege, Erinnerungen 1939 - 1944 (Bernard & Graefe

one considers the counterstroke at the Donec river in February 1943 and the battle of Kursk or 'Operation Zitadelle' in July 1943, they should be viewed within this context, rather than as single battles. These twin operations are outstanding examples of how von Manstein thought Stalin could be convinced of the need to negotiate a reasonable peace settlement.

The Soviet winter offensive 1942/43 had pushed the Germans into the strategic and operational defensive along the entire eastern front. The overextended German forces were hardly able to prevent decisive Soviet breakthroughs (Annex 1). At the beginning of January 1943 two offensive thrusts from the north and the east were aimed at Rostov in order to cut off all German troops south of the Don river (Annex 2). This posed the threat of a repetition of Stalingrad on a greater scale and could only be avoided at the last moment. At the same time, the Voronez-Front and the Southwest-Front succeeded in destroying the 8th Italian and the 2nd Hungarian Army. The result was a 300-kilometer wide gap between Army Group B and Army Group Don[16].

The objective of the Soviet thrust was the Dnieper crossings by Dnepropetrovsk and Zaporoze. By seizing these traffic bottlenecks, the supply line of Army Group Don would be severed. A follow on attack could entrap the entire southern wing at the Sea of Azov. The destruction of the German southern wing was only one part of a greater Soviet scheme to smash the complete German eastern front (Annex 3). At the same time as the Voronez and Southwest Fronts drove southwest, the Brjansk and West Fronts were intended to split Army Group Center. The newly built Central Front - created through the release of forces after the capitulation of Stalingrad - could capitalize on the envisioned success of the two Fronts and complete the encirclement of Army Group Center.[17]

Verlag, 11. Auflage, Koblenz 1987), 475

[16] The West Point Atlas of American Wars, Volume II, ed. Vincent J. Esposito (Frederick A. Praeger, New York, Washington, London, 1969), Map 36

[17] David M. Glantz, "Prelude to Kursk: Soviet Strategic Operations, February - March 1943", in Gezeitenwechsel im Zweiten Weltkrieg? ed. Roland G. Foerster (Verlag E.S. Mittler & Sohn, Hamburg, Berlin, Bonn, 1996), 31

The High Command of the German Army (Oberkommando des Heeres) assessed the situation in the south as the more serious. On February 12, 1943 it restructured the chain of command. Army Group B was abolished and its area of responsibility, as well as, its forces were divided between Army Group Center and Army Group Don - now renamed Army Group South.[18] With this decision Field Marshal von Manstein, the commander in chief Army Group South became responsible for the gaping hole south of Kharkov.

Prelude to Kursk - Manstein's Counterstroke at the Donec River

The situation as described soon approached a crisis point (Annex 4). In order to counter the Soviet thrust Manstein needed to gain mobile and experienced troops with enough punch to blunt the Soviet drive. The only way to accomplish this was by extracting troops from existing units in contact. This meant shortening the frontline, accept even more risk, use the space for maneuver and shape the battlefield in order to counterattack or "strike from the backhand" (Schlagen aus der Nachhand). To accomplish these things Manstein had to fight the Russians, the weather and even his overall commander, Hitler. The latter took the same strategy he had used in December 1941 and wanted to hold the conquered area at all costs. Only when he learned, during a visit at the HQ of Army Group South, how critical the situation faced by the German Army was, did he concede operational freedom of action.

The numerical superiority of the Soviets was 6/7 to 1[19]. The Soviets attacked with 16 armies and Tank Group Popov. These forces were organized in three Fronts, the South Front, the Southwest Front and the Voronez Front. The German Army Group South commanded the 1st and 4th Tank Armies and the improvised Hollidt and Lanz (as

[18] Manstein, 451
[19] The West Point Atlas, Map 34

of 19 February "Kempf") Armies. Manstein could employ only 354 combat ready tanks.[20] In contrast the average Soviet Front had some 600 tanks available.[21]

Operational Planning

The Operations Plan of Army Group South (Annex 5) called for three phases and it consisted of an economy of force operation in the south and the north, as well as, of a dynamic concentration of forces and a counterstroke in the center:

> Phase 1: Withdrawal of the German forces (1st , 4th and Hollidt Army) in the Don-Donets bend north of Rostov behind the Mius River. Thus shortening the frontline from 400 to 180 kilometers providing a gain of the Headquarters of 4th Tank Army and 4 tank divisions as striking forces.
>
> Phase 2: Redeployment of Headquarters 4th Tank Army from the right to the left wing of the Army Group (castling) as well as repositioning ten tank divisions
>
> Phase 3: Counterstroke with all available forces against the enemy forces in the gap between Lanz Army and 1st Tank Army.

Campaign Execution

Through these far-flung movements, which were primarily carried out from 12 to 18 February 1943, Manstein succeeded in building a funnel, into which the armies of the South West Front pushed (Annex 6). Manstein initiated the German counter offensive with three Tank Corps on February 19 attacking from different directions. It gained full momentum by February 21. By 5 March it had been so

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[20] Friedhelm Klein und Karl-Heinz Frieser, "Mansteins Gegenschlag am Donec", Militaergeschichte (Heft 1, 1. Quartal 1999), 13

[21] David Glantz, From the Don to the Dnepr. Soviet Offensive Operations Dezember 1942 - August 1943 (London 1991), 87

successful that the 4th and 1st Tank Army had reconquered the area almost up to Kharkov and had destroyed the forces of the Southwest Front in the area (Annex 7).

Since the thawing period had not yet started, Manstein took the opportunity and exploited the momentum of the attack continuing his thrust to the northeast (Annex 8). The forces of the Voronez Front in this area were destroyed, in part because their earlier rapid advances had caused their supply lines to be overextended. By March 23, German forces had succeeded in regaining the entire area up to the Donec River including Kharkov and Belgorod. The counterstoke had another welcome consequence. It successfully spoiled the planned attack of the Central Front against Army Group Center since Manstein's forces threatened the south flank and rear of the Front. In order to counter this threat, the Stavka diverted four armies to reinforce the Voronez Front. Lacking these armies Central Front had to cancel its attack.[22] Together with the end of Manstein's counterstroke the stage for the ensuing Battle of Kursk was geographically and strategically set.

German and Russian Options at the Eastern Front after Manstein's Counterstroke

According to German estimates, the Russians had sustained more than 11 million casualties. The strength of the resistance should have been almost exhausted. The situation for Moscow became worse because of its defeats and the end of the winter campaign by Kharkov. To reach a favorable solution in the east, it was decisive for the Germans to deal additional heavy blows to the Soviets, which could lead to bleeding their forces white. Finally this could provide for the needed German success in the east. Most of the German military leaders as well as Hitler agreed with this assessment. However, they disagreed on the definition of a favorable situation and what the ways would be to reach this situation. For Manstein and other senior officers, a draw in the east was the only remaining possibility. For Hitler, this was completely unacceptable. According to his 'all or nothing' stance only a total defeat of the Soviet Union was acceptable. Hitler's concept of the war's end state was the main reason,

[22] Glantz, Prelude..., 52

why he could not agree to Manstein's proposed method of continuing the war in the east.

Strike from the Backhand

Manstein was convinced that the German forces not longer were sufficient for the strategic offensive. He concluded that under these conditions only a strategic defense remained a viable option. According to his ideas, the German forces should await the Russian attacks, draw the Soviets into the depth of space and then counterstrike into their deep flank and rear (Annex 9) similar to his planned and conducted counterstroke at the Donec river. The Soviet armies could be encircled in a huge area at the Sea of Azov. Even though it was supposed to be launched out of the strategic defense it had amazing similarities with the German campaign in west against France in May 1940 (Annex 10). In that campaign the area of Flanders was the bait that should have provoked the Allies to push forward. They unintentionally triggered a rotating door effect since the more impetuously they pushed forward, the easier it was to attack their rear.[23] This rotating door effect was also the basic principle of the "Schlieffen Plan" of 1914 (Annex 11). It did not work, because the German emperor refused to surrender only one foot of German soil.

In spring of 1943 Manstein still saw good opportunities in the southern section of the eastern front.[24] He expected the Soviet main offensive in this area. Nowhere else were the Soviets offered better operational, economical and political chances. There was still the opportunity to envelop the entire German south wing at the coasts of the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea. At the same time a Soviet victory at the south wing would regain the important Donbas region and the granary of the Ukraine, both important for economic reasons. Further, Soviet successes in this area would mean that the route to the Balkans and the Romanian oilfields would be open. Finally, it would influence the policy of Turkey. In addition, the deployment of the Soviet forces spoke in

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[23] Friedhelm Klein und Karl-Heinz Frieser, 14
[24] Manstein, 476 - 483

favor of Manstein's assessment. Russian sources accessible since the end of the cold war prove that Manstein's assessment was correct.[25]

Based on this assessment, he proposed again to thin out the German forces in the Donbas region in order to draw strong Soviet forces into this area and then destroy them by a counterattack (Annex 9). While Manstein's strategy had proven to be successful, it would not be implemented. Hitler was unwilling to surrender, even temporarily, any terrain gained through previous campaigns, nor was he willing to concentrate the forces required to implement Manstein's strategy because of the risks it would pose to other theaters of war or sections of the eastern front.

Strike from the Forehand

Despite the differences between Manstein and Hitler over what was possible on the Eastern Front, even Hitler agreed that the German forces were not sufficient to resume an all out offensive in 1943. Though he realized this, he still wanted to aggressively strike the Soviet Army with aggressive actions 'from the forehand' rather than from the backhand (Annex 12). He did not want to wait and counter, but instead he wanted to engage in offensive warfare.[26] He was not sure if the Soviets would attack again in spring 1943 before the Western Allies had the opportunity to open a second front on the continent. Thus, the plan for exploiting the weaknesses of the Soviets after their late winter defeats was chosen. He wanted to strike before they were operational again specifically before they could rebuild their heavily attrited tank forces. The Kursk salient invited that kind of operation. The Kursk salient extended the frontline for almost 500 kilometers and held within it a significant number of Soviet units. Attacking it also held significant advantages for the German Army since its intrusion into German lines essentially cut important lines of communications between Army Groups Center and South. Finally this salient posed a real threat to German forces in the field because it

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[25] Roland G. Forester, Einfuhrung in Gezeitenwechsel Im Zweiten Weltkrieg, 21 and Boris V. Soklov, The Battle for Kusk, Orel and Char'kov, in Gezeitenwechsel im Zweiten Weltkrieg, 73.
[26] Manstein, 483 – 484.

could serve as base for an attack by the Soviets into the northern flank of Army Group South or into the southern flank of Army Group Center.

Operation 'Zitadelle'

Planning Phase

According to the guidance of the High Command of the Army (OKH) the German intent was to hit the Soviets at a point in time where they were not prepared.[27] Kursk the salient should therefor be destroyed by a pincer attack of Army Group Center and Army Group South. The forces had to attack at the salient at its base (Annex 13).

Zitadelle was originally scheduled to begin immediately after the spring thaw. When that time came, early in May 1943 the Germans quickly realized that the Soviets had anticipated this attack on the flanks of the Kursk salient. Reconnaissance showed continuous, well-organized and deep defense preparations along the flanks. Given the well-constructed defenses in depth, key German officers voiced serious doubts about launching the attacks given the limited prospects for success. Rather than cancel the attacks, Hitler postponed them and decided to refit and rearm the attacking units in order to improve the chances for success. He placed considerable faith in the new German tanks, Panther and Tiger, which were scheduled for delivery in early June 1943. The delivery of these new models was delayed till the beginning of July 1943; necessitating yet another postponement in the attacks. Given a welcome respite, the Soviets used this additional time to increase and improve their defensive preparations.

As a result, the Kursk salient became a bristling fortress. Dozens of deep defense systems, several kilometers deep and structured in layers were prepared along the frontline. A labyrinth of trenches, bunkers, tank traps, anti-tank positions and minefields awaited the Germans.

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[27] Ibid., 485

Military planners, recognizing through reconnaissance efforts what was occurring, developed several alternative plans to avoid the strong points of what had become the fortress of Kursk. One alternative was to attack frontally from the West (Annex 14)[28] rather than to do a stencil-like pincer attack. Along the front of the salient the Soviet defensive positions were the least prepared. If this were done, a relatively easy breakthrough could be achieved and German units could then spread left and right and press the Soviet defenders into their own minefields. Thus it would not have been a concentric envelopment from the outside but an eccentric envelopment from the inside. This alternative was turned down. Allegedly there was not enough time left to reposition the attacking forces.

Manstein proposed another solution based on a problem that he noted. The Steppe Front was assembled directly behind the Kursk salient as 'strategic reserve. He feared that the German forces engaging in a flank attack on the Kursk salient could be struck on their eastern flank by a Soviet counterattack. Thus, he proposed to attack the reserve first (Annex 15)[29]. By so doing, the German tank forces could have exploited their greatest strength, the conduct of free and flexible operations. Simultaneously a far-flung movement, deeper in the base of the salient, would have still encircled the Kursk salient. Even better, the defensive system constructed by the Soviets would be avoided. But this proposal was also turned down because of the high risk of a deeper attack. Thus, the original plan remained in place. The German Army would attack where the Soviets expected and where the Soviets had prepared a formidable defense.

For the Germans to retain the original plan, when its intent was so obvious to the enemy, is difficult for many students of military operations to understand. To make the situation even worse, the force ratio was very unfavorable for the Germans and they knew it. They had only three armies for the attack, a total of some 600,000 men and

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[28] Karl-Heinz Frieser, "Schlagen aus der Nachhand - Schlagen aus der Vorhand. Die Schlachten von Char'kov und Kursk 1943" in Gezeitenwechsel im Zweiten Weltkrieg? ed. Roland G. Foerster (Verlag E.S. Mittler & Sohn, Hamburg, Berlin, Bonn, 1996), 112

[29] Ibid., 113

2000 tanks, supported by about 500 aircraft. The Soviets had employed in the Kursk salient two Fronts (Voronesh Front and Central Front) and behind it another Front (Steppe Front). Altogether there were 18 Soviet armies (almost two million men) with 5130 tanks and 3200 aircraft.[30]

Hitler, however, held tight to the original plan because time was running out. His reasoning was the Germans could not wait any longer. It was entirely possible that the Russians could attack very soon or he also thought it possible that they might not attack before the next winter. They might even wait until the establishment of a second front on the continent. Due to the enormity of enemy casualties in the late winter, Hitler expected the Russians to collapse soon. If the two reinforced fronts in the salient of Kursk could be destroyed, their destruction would even exacerbate their collapse and change the situation decisively in favor of Germany. A decisive success would also be of great significance for the home front and for encouraging Germany's allies. Accordingly, he wrote into his guidance No 6: "The victory at Kursk has to have the effect of a beacon seen around the world."[31]

Campaign Execution

The attack, even the exact time of the attack, came as no surprise to the Soviets. Because they had been forewarned about the time of attack, they triggered a counter preparation fire on 5 July 1943 at 2.30 hours. Using artillery and the airforce, they attempted to destroy the German units within their assembly areas and to prevent an organized attack. Fortunately for the Wehrmacht, the counter preparation fire was triggered too early, as was later noted by Soviet Marshal Zhukov. When initiated, German troops still were in their concealed positions and the intended effect was

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[30] Ibid., 114-115 and Boris V. Sokolov, "The Battle for Kursk, Orel and Char'kov: Strategic Intentions and Results. A Critical View of the Soviet Historiography" in Gezeitenwechsel im Zweiten Weltkrieg? ed. Roland G. Foerster (Verlag E.S. Mittler & Sohn, Hamburg, Berlin, Bonn, 1996), 69-88

[31] Quoted in U.S. Army War College, Case Studies, Kursk-1943, Earl F. Ziemke, From Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in theEast. (Washington D.C. Office of the Chief of Military History, 1968), 13

missed. Despite these clever countermeasures, the German attack proceeded according to plan.

The 9th German Army, attacking from the north, advanced slowly. During the first two days it succeeded only in penetrating the Soviet position to a depth of 14 kilometers. Beginning with the second day, the Soviets continuously launched vigorous counterattacks so that by July 9, 1943 the attack of 9th Army came to a stand still, only 18 kilometers from the starting position. When the Soviets launched their own counter offensive out of the Orel bow on July 12 1943, the 9th's Army's attack had to be canceled in order to move strong mobile forces to the threatened area.

The attack from the south by 4th Tank Army and Kempf Army was much more successful. By July 11, 1943 4th Army was close to a decisive breakthrough 50 kilometers south of Kursk. To counter this dangerous situation, the Soviets had to hastily employ two armies of Steppe Front (5th Guard Army and 5th Guard Tank Army). Both armies were aimed at the eastern flank of 4th German Tank Army. Although superior in numbers both Soviet armies lost a great number of their tanks on the very first day of their attack. As a result, they had to cancel their offensive operation. Conversely, on the German side, the losses of tanks was surprisingly low. The Second SS Panzerkorps, from the main effort, lost only five tanks out of 273 operational tanks on July 12 1943. the German infantry, however, were hit more seriously. Despite infantry losses, the 4th Tank Army was able to continue its attack on July 13. The continuation was in keeping with the intent of Army Group South, which at this point still had the XXIV. Panzerkorps (2 divisions) as an available reserve.

Despite the successes of the southern attack, on July 13, 1943 Hitler intervened and ordered 'Zitadelle' cancelled. American and British troops had landed on Sicily on July 10, 1943 and Hitler thought it necessary to withdraw forces from the eastern front to avert disaster in Italy. Field Marshal von Manstein strongly disagreed arguing that despite the danger the successes at Kursk were being given away for nothing. After all, any forces withdrawn for Italy would come too late to positively effect the battle there.

The Soviets, despite heavy casualties, were not given the knock out blow and could transition to the attack. Their units quickly recuperated and were concentrated at the critical area of Kursk.

The ability of the German tank units to attack was not broken, however. One important falacy that exists about this engagement is the widespread opinion that at Kursk the Soviets achieved a decisive destruction of the German tank units. In reality, the figures show another picture. The German Army only lost 262 out of 2000 tanks and guns employed, whereas the Soviets lost 1614. During the follow on attack at Orel (July 12 to August 18, 1943) and Belgorod (August 3 to 23 1943) the Soviets lost 4450 more tanks and guns. In comparison, the German loss rates were astoundingly low. The explanation for the low German German rate is that they would hold most of the battle field until July 16, 1943. Thus, they could recover and repair most of the damaged tanks. German loss rates on the Eastern front did not increase until the delaying operations before the Dnieper, when numerous tanks could not be recovered and repaired and had to be abandoned on the battlefield.

Discussion of Counterstroke and Zitadelle

Since Zitadelle was cancelled by Hitler and failed to achieve its stated objectives, how should a student of military History regard this operation that has so intrigued students of the military art in the last fifty years. My analysis is as follows...

According to current U.S military doctrine, Every military operation should be directed "toward a clearly defined, decisive, and attainable objective".[32] Judged by contemporary U.S. doctrine, in 1943 such a German strategic objective was not attainable. This was recognized at the end of 1942 when the High Command of the Armed Forces (Oberkommando der Wehrmacht) assessed the situation and concluded that the situation dictated a transition to the strategic defense. It was also convinced, that by seeking to retain the territorial gains of previous military endeavors, the war

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[32] Headquarters Department of the Army, FM 100-5 Operations (Washington D.C. 1993), 2-4

could not be concluded victoriously. While their assessment was correct, their solutions were the old recipes: continuation of the submarine warfare and a new all out **offensive** in the east. The objective of the second strategic concept latter was to decisively sever the Soviets from the economic power sources in the Caucasus region and thus draw strong Anglo-Saxon forces into the middle orient, where they could be decisively defeated.[33] This was merely a repeat of the failed strategy of 1942. How it could be successfully implemented under decidedly worse conditions facing the Wehrmacht in 1943 was never explained.

Von Manstein, however, assessed the situation differently. He felt that a victory against the Soviet Union was simply not achievable with the resources available in 1943. Thus, a political settlement, which would produce favorable conditions for Germany, was the only remaining alternative. To achieve this end, the Army would be required to conduct operations which would make the war as costly as possible to the Soviets. Therefor, his counterstroke sought to restore a solid defensive position on the eastern front and, prevent the destruction of the German south wing, and at the same time to destroy as many Soviet units as possible. His proposals were designed to deal even heavier blows from the 'backhand' aimed at the same area and with the same goals. And indeed, after his successful counterstroke the Soviet government inquired about the possibility of a separate peace settlement with Germany. Negotiations, however, never occurred because Hitler was opposed to negotiating any settlement short of victory.[34]

The objective of "Operation Zitadelle" was to smash strong Soviet forces, shortening the frontline and to send a strong signal, in particular to Germany's wavering allies. It is not clear, however how this operation fitted into an overall grand strategy. After 1943 Hitler had no strategic answer to the increasing amount of problems. His

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[33] Oberkommando der Wehrmacht/Wehrmachtfuehrungsstab, Denkschrift ueber die strategische Lage vom 10. Dezember 1942, quoted in Juergen Foerster, Strategische Ueberlegungen des Wehrmachtfuehrungsstabes fuer das Jahr 1943, Miltaergeschichtliche Monatshefte,13 (1973), 95 - 107, 104-105

[34] Gerhard L. Weinberg, "Zur Frage des Sonderfriedens im Osten" in Gezeiten-

intention seemed to be only to prolong an already lost war.[35] Likewise, on the operational level, it remains at least questionable, whether "Zitadelle" had a realistically attainable objective considering the force ratio and the preparedness of the defense.

German Problems with the Unity of Command

Although the Wehrmacht suffered with problems relating to unity of command, some of Manstein's proposals did significantly contribute to unity of command. By dissolving Army Group B, dividing its forces and area of responsibility between Army Group Center and Army Group South, the 'Oberkommando des Heeres' assured unity of command for the most threatened section of the eastern front. Manstein could mass his combat power toward the common objective to close the gap and smash the attacking Soviet forces. Conversely, unity of command was not assured for 'Zitadelle' at the operational level at the frontline. Resolving this issue was beyond Manstein's span of control. The overall commander was Hitler with his headquarters in Germany. This was a considerable disadvantage, because he could not receive the immediate and direct impressions from the battlefield. Moreover, the communication between Hitler and the Army Group commanders was difficult and cumbersome. Thus, commanders were forced to repeatedly travel to Hitler's headquarters. Besides it became clear, that Hitler had become seriously overextended, due to his double responsibility as political leader and the only real unified commander. Since he was not willing or capable of delegating, the war posed extraordinary demands on him in the political, military, social and economic realms. In addition, in crisis situations Hitler tended to even command single battalions. Thus, inefficiency and discontinuity often characterized his decisions. [36]The situation was exacerbated in the military field, since the responsibilities for the different theaters of war were divided between 'Oberkommando der Wehrmacht' (responsible for all theaters of war except the east) and Oberkommando des Heeres (responsible only for the east).

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wechsel ....., 179

[35] Bernd Wegner, "Das Ende der Strategie. Deutschlands politische und militaerische Lage nach Stalingrad" in Gezeitenwechsel ....., 228

Operational Freedom of Action, Simplicity and Directive Control

According to the established concepts in most western armies, freedom of action is the decisive condition for successful strategic and operational leadership. In order to gain and maintain freedom of action in a war it is necessary for a senior commander to retain the ability to keep his options open and to deprive the enemy of his options. Freedom of action depends not only on the enemy but on the superior commander's willingness to grant latitude to his subordinates. The superior commander has to grant more freedom of action to higher commanders, in short, the "higher the level of command the shorter orders have to be."[37] According to Helmuth von Moltke's writings, "The unhappiest commander-in-chief is one, who has a superior, to whom he has to account all his drafts, plans and intentions... On this every independence, every quick decision, every bold daring has to fail." But a war cannot be waged without one of them.[38] Since in war uncertain situations are frequent, it is necessary for a senior commander to act independently to retain or gain the initiative. This requires the operational leader to take immediate action, rather than seek specific guidance. He must act in accordance with the superior leader's overall guidance and to be able "to modify the set task without referring back, if he is satisfied that further pursuit of that aim would not represent the best use of his resources and in furtherance of his superior's intention."[39]

Freedom of action was an important element in Manstein's counterstroke. By using freedom of action and leading in accordance with 'directive control' it was possible to regroup the disorganized German forces and put them into an appropriate order of battle for the counterstroke. Furthermore, along the Donets in the winter 1943, the first encounters were a series of meeting engagements. They happened unexpectedly and it was simply not possible to give orders in advance to provide specific guidance. These

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[36] Guenter Roth, "Vorwort" in Gezeitenwechsel...., 15

[37] Helmuth Graf von Moltke, "Direktiven"; quoted in Jehuda L. Wallach, Kriegstheorien (Frankfurt, 1972), 82

[38] Ibid., 85

meeting engagements were fatal for the Soviets, because when scripted actions were no longer valid, they were indecisive. When they were in a fluid situation, and could not contact their leader, helplessness resulted. In these situations German units had a decided advantage. The Germans, trained in 'Auftragstaktik' (directive control) were able to display their strength, act independently and rapidly.

Manstein's short order for the counterstroke is a good example of directive control, simplicity and the necessary leeway given to subordinates. It consists only of one sentence: "Army Group South defends mole position (along Mius river) and joining northern front to Sslawjansk, strikes with newly organized 4th Tank Army enemy in gap between 1st Tank Army and Kempf Army and covers the deep flank and the attack of 4th Army in the are forward Poltawa - Achtyrka".[40] The following paragraphs, with orders for the armies, are also very short and general. Only directive control made it possible to hand over the decisive part of the operation to Colonel General Hoth, the commander of 4th Tank Army after the counterstroke had already started.

The real basis of directive control is an unbroken chain of trust and mutual respect running from the commander in chief to the lowest rank. What negated this traditional German strength was Hitler, the Commander-inChief. Hitler did not have this kind of confidence in his subordinates. In the beginning of February 1943 he vehemently refused to take into account the realities of the development of the situation. He thought the possession of the Donets basin was indispensable for postwar economic reasons and sought to retain it even when it was militarily impossible.[41] Hitler only relented and agreed to give up the area when he realized that he had only two possibilities: either to lose only the Donets basin or to lose the Donec basin and an entire Army Group. Only then did he give the necessary flexibility to his commanders.

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[39] Richard E. Simpkin, Race to the Swift (New York, 1989), 232

[40] Telex (Army Group South) of 19. February 1943, 21.55 hours, quotet in Friedhelm Klein and Karl-Heinz Frieser, Mansteins Gegenschlag ...., 16

[41] Friedhelm Klein and Karl-Heinz Frieser, Mansteins Gegenschlag ...., 14

Thus, it was very difficult for Manstein to get the necessary freedom of action and to prevent policy from demanding things that were against logical military practices.[42]

On the battlefield Manstein achieved freedom of action by shortening the frontline. To stay in the Don-Donets balcony would have meant to overextend German forces and leave freedom of action entirely with the enemy, allow him to break through at will and to quickly collapse the German defense. Furthermore, the Soviets could have maintained the initiative by moving continuously fresh forces from the Stalingrad area through the gap in the frontline. Shortening the front exchanged the obligation to employ all available forces in the defense against the freedom of action connected with winning agile forces out of the front.

In contrast, at Kursk the commanders in chief of Army Group Center and Army Group South were very limited in their freedom of action. Hitler determined the concept, the plan, the point in time, the force allocation and the order to attack. He interfered decisively when he prohibited the employment of Manstein's operational reserve, XXIV. Panzerkorps, thus taking away the rest of Manstein's freedom of action.
On the lower levels freedom of action was granted and directive control was practiced. That some latitude was given to commanders in the field provides the principal explanation for German successes, specifically in the south, despite the very unfavorable force ratio.

Depth

Modern military writers have discussed the significance of depth in operations. "Depth is the extension of operations in time, space, resources, and purpose." [43] The exploitation of space is one possibility to wear down enemy forces in order to turn from the defensive to the offensive and to regain the initiative. Mechanized, highly mobile

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[42] Carl von Clausewitz, On War (New Jersey 1976) 608
[43] FM 100-5, 2-7

forces, which are attacking in points of main efforts, can only be defeated by mobile, active and decisive operations, which utilize the depth of the space.[44]

With his counterstroke Manstein accomplished this:[45] He abandoned positions, which could be defended only with great difficulties and prepared favorable defense positions in the depth. He lured the opponent into the depth in order to lead him to his culmination point early and followed with attacks into his flanks. Manstein exchanged space for reserves which necessitated surrendering terrain. In withdrawing his forces to the string of the Donets bow, he shortened the length of his defensive positions from 400 to 180 kilometers. Thus, 4th Tank Army was made available as a reserve. Manstein's domination of space was evident in using both depth and width. He moved his troops like a chess master on a chessboard and shifted radically his point of main effort. The switch of forces, analogous to a chessmaster castling, from the right to the left wing of the Army Group is an excellent example of his abilities.

Manstein also made good use of time. He assessed both his and his enemy's options far in advance of possible operations, without succumbing to the danger of speculation. He moved his forces, in such a timely manner, that he always had several options available.

At Kursk, an operation where Hitler controlled all elements of the planning, the situation was entirely different. It was an offensive operation. Kursk also violated key principles of war that Manstein, had he been in control, would have observed. For example, the best use of space is where an attack threatens the enemy's lines of communication. If this reasoning is used for this operation, the German objective should have at least been in the area, where Steppe Front was located. Instead the strongpoints, the fortified flanks of the Soviet salient, were attacked. The available space was not properly used.

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[44] Hans Henning von Sandrat, InspH, Operative Leitlinie, (Bonn 1987), 14
[45] Friedhelm Klein and Karl-Heinz Frieser, Mansteins Gegenschlag ...., 14

Indirect Approach against Flank and Rear

Military strategists have long advised commanders in the field to use the indirect attack, or attacks into the flanks or rear. "Thus, march by an indirect route and divert the enemy will be enticing him with a bait. By so doing, you may set out after he does and arrive before him. One able to do this understands the strategy of the direct and indirect."[46] Manstein understood these concepts. The quick solution for plugging the huge gap in the frontline would have been to throw all available forces into the gap in order to reestablish a connected front. Manstein refused this piecemeal approach as tactical patch up job. He wanted to pull as many agile and armored units together in order to have the required punch. Moreover, by attacking the forces of the enemy at its flank and rear, preferably at his supply lines and command posts, he followed the principles of Sun Tzu and Clausewitz: "Go into emptiness, strike voids, bypass what he defends, hit him where he does not expect you."[47] "Consequently, the forces available must be employed with such skill that even in the absence of absolute superiority, relative superiority is attained at the decisive point."[48] This indirect method showed enormous psychological effect as well. Numerous Soviet soldiers panicked and fled. That explains also why the German success cost only few own casualties.[49] "The enemy must not know where I intend to give battle. For if he does not know where I intend to give battle, he must prepare in a great many places. And when he prepares in a great many places, those I have to fight in any one place will be few."[50]

These lessons were not followed with "Operation Zitadelle". One principle reason for the early war successes of the "Wehrmacht" was, that the "first move was to turn the enemy tactically, by a surprise penetration, or better still through a gap."[51] The basic idea was to avoid the strong points of the enemy in order to keep the momentum. At

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[46] Sun Tzu, The Art of War, translated and with an introduction by Samuel B. Griffith, (London, Oxford, New York 1963), 102
[47] Ibid., 96
[48] Carl von Clausewitz, 197
[49] Friedhelm Klein and Karl-Heinz Frieser, 14
[50] Sun Tzu, 98
[51] Simpkin, 27

Kursk Hitler ignored both the principle of surprise and the concept of striking at the enemies center of weakness. Instead, he attacked their strength.

Mass (Schwerpunkt), Economy of Forces, Risk and Conformity of Operational Thought

Employing mass, using the effects of overwhelming combat power at the decisive place and time, is an important part of modern warfare. Neither during the attack on the Soviet Union in 1941 nor in the campaign of 1942 did the Germans abide with this principle at the strategic level. In 1941, the deviation of strong German forces from their thrust towards Moscow in the south may have decided the outcome of World War II. The Soviet Supreme Command did not do any better during the first few years of the war. In February 1943 it conducted its winter offensive with a width of some 500 kilometers. It had no clear main effort (Schwerpunkt). Instead of concentrating its forces on the decisive point - the Dnieper crossings at Dnepropetrovsk, it dissipated it forces eccentrically in three different directions.

This opened the chance for Manstein to be superior at the decisive point. His numerical inferiority, during the Kharkov operation, forced him to an extreme concentration, particularly of tank forces. To achieve this high level of concentration, it was decisive to stabilize the front, where possible, with the least amount of forces. The risk he was willing to take, by concentrating almost all his tank forces on the northern wing, is remarkable. That meant that the Hollidt Army had to fight on its own against six armies, among them one tank army. Conversely, it permitted Manstein to build one main effort, within the main effort in the northern section. Initially the Kempf Army had to hold almost alone the attack of the Voronez Front. Even when Kempf Army's northern flank was turned he decided to hold tight to his main effort, because Kempf still had space to trade. Thus he accepted a calculated risk, whereas the success of his counterstroke decided, whether the 1st Tank Army and Hollidt Army would survive. After destruction of the attacking units of the Southwest Front, he attacked the Voronez Front with all available forces. By continuously shifting his main effort Manstein succeeded in

changing an absolute numerical inferiority into subsequent relative superiority at the decisive point.[52]

At Kursk, the situation was radically different. Long before the attack at the Kursk salient started, the Germans knew that the Soviets were aware of their intentions. Instead of changing the plan or even seeking a decisive battle at a much greater scale, Hitler held tight to the original plan. For this to have been successful, it would have required the German Army to lay bare forces in other theaters of war, including a timely withdrawal from Africa. But this kind of thinking was unfamiliar to Hitler, who was adverse to risk in a twofold manner. He refused maneuver warfare, which only was possible by temporary surrender of terrain. In addition, he was hesitant to lay bare his forces in side fronts or side theaters of war in favor of the point where the decision had to be reached, as long as there was some risk remaining.[53]At Kursk the massing did not take place. Hitler was not ready to deploy additional forces to the east for the upcoming battle at Kursk. He even failed to specify a of main effort at one of the prongs of the attack.[54]

His hesitancy to take risks becomes very clear during the battle, when he decided to withdraw forces from the attack to move them to Italy, where the Allies had just landed. The principle, who defends everywhere defends nothing was a concept that he failed to practice, or understand. That unambiguous massing of forces at the decisive point, by taking risk at other places, had been proven before at the strategic as well as on the operational level in German military history. Manstein embodied the tradition of the German General Staff.

His ideas resulted from a lengthy development of military theory that led to a specific school of strategic and operational thought.[55] For example, in 1914 Germany massed its forces in the west to defeat France quickly. In the east only 8th Army was left as covering force to stop a Russian attack- a typical economy of forces operation and

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[52] Friedhelm Klein and Karl-Heinz Frieser, 15
[53] Manstein, 308
[54] Ibid., 491: Colonel General Guderian proposed to mass all tank forces at one prong
[55] Friedhelm Klein and Karl-Heinz Frieser, 17

an example of high risk taking. The 8th Army was then attacked by the Russian Njemen Army from the east and by the Russian Narev Army from the south (Annex 16). In this situation, the commander of 8th Army again decided to take risk in the east by leaving only few forces at the Masurian lakes in order to mass his forces against Narev Army. A corps of 8th Army was moved across East Prussia to the south. Coming from four different directions they built a funnel into which Narev Army moved - then they struck. The similarities to Manstein's counterstroke are stunning. Even in 1914 this kind of operation was not new to the Germans. Almost since the German/French War of 1870/71 they had wargamed, in map exercises and terrain walks, how to outmaneuver numerical superior attacking enemy forces.[56]

Synchronization

Synchronization is a principle of war understood by generations of military leaders and well practiced by the German Army. It was very evident in the operations at Kharkov. In the diagram of General von Senger und Etterlin (Annex 17) the basic factors for the first encounter are depicted:[57]

- the space in a segment of the frontline of 320 km
- the time from February 15th to February 25th
- the forces - the employed divisions from north to south
- the different kind of operation and their rapid change

On February 15 delaying operations dominated German actions. The tank divisions in the south were still employed for limited counter attacks. Relief operations followed to make the forces for the counterstroke available. On February 19 Manstein issued his order for the counterstroke, initiating the approach phase. The tank divisions on the right wing had to be shifted over considerable distances to reach their starting positions (castling). First pre attacks were started simultaneously on the left wing. On

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[56] Ibid., 17

[57] von Senger und Etterlin, Gegenschlagsoperation, 181; quoted in Friedhelm Klein and Karl-Heinz Frieser, 15

February 21 at noon 4th Tank Army became responsible for the coordination of the battle area. For this the tank divisions - spread over 320 km - were concentrated within an 80 kilometer wide area of operations. The main attack of the four leading tank divisions started on 25 February. Two factors are not considered combat service support and air support. The organization of combat service support for this operation was a remarkable performance.

The Luftwaffe generated 1000 to 1500 sorties a day - compared to the average rate of only 350 immediately before the operation. Without having the air force as fire brigade it would have been hardly possible to hold at the thinned out areas along the frontline.

At Kursk synchronization on the operational level took place to the extend possible, however these efforts were counterbalanced by the successful synchronization on the Soviet side – not at least because of the available preparation time.

To postpone the attack did not contribute to mass at the decisive point at the right time. Not only that the Soviets could react in a timely manner, but also because the newly fielded tanks – Panther, Tiger and Ferdinand – were not sufficiently tested. In addition "Zitadelle" collided with the Allied landing on Sicily. This event was predictable, when Hitler decided to postpone the attack.[58]

Culmination Point and Offensive

Manstein waited with his counterstroke till the Soviet forces reached their culmination point. For this he made extraordinary use of the battlespace. The further the Soviets pushed west, the more extended their lines of supply became, the more promising the counterattack. When Manstein launched his counterstroke, the Soviet

[58] Manstein, 492

tank units had hardly any ammunition and fuel left. The Soviet troops had been on the move uninterruptedly for almost six weeks. They were exhausted. Obviously envisioned Manstein this culmination point and recognized it, when it occurred. He kept calm, in contrast to Hitler, in the face of the approaching Soviet tank masses. The further they pushed west, the deeper the drove into the trap and the more promising the planned counterattack became. Manstein patience in waiting for the culminating point and recognizing when it came is nothing short on brilliance.

Clausewitz wrote about such situations stating, "Once a defender has gained an important advantage, he must strike back, or he will court destruction."[59] Clausewitz further stated:

> "A sudden powerful transition to the offensive - the flashing sword of vengeance - is the greatest moment for the defense. If it is not in the commander's mind from the start, or rather if it is not an integral part of his idea of defense, he will never be persuaded of the superiority of the defensive form[...] Moreover, it is a crude error to equate attack with the idea of assault alone, and therefore, to conceive of defense as merely misery and confusion."[60]

Conversely at Kursk the German attackers reached a culmination point that was not caused by exhaustion but by canceling the attack and withdrawal of important units. At the strategic level, however, the German Reich had reached its culmination point long before. General von Kielmannsegg put it that way: "Moscow was the turning point (culmination point), Stalingrad tied our hands, and Kursk was the end - the end of every German initiative, be it on the strategic or operational level."[61]

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[59] Clausewitz, 370

[60] Ibid., 370

[61] Johann Adolf Graf von Kielmannsegg, "Bemerkungen eines Zeitzeugen zu den Schlachten von Char'kov und Kursk aus der Sicht des damaligen Generalstabs-Offiziers Ia in der Operationsabteilung des Generalstabs des Heeres" in Gezeitenwechsel im Zweiten Weltkrieg? ed. Roland G. Foerster (Verlag E.S. Mittler & Sohn, Hamburg, Berlin, Bonn, 1996), 148

Information Superiority, Security and Surprise[62]

"Strike the enemy at a time or place or in a manner for which he is unprepared."[63] For Manstein's counterstroke, German pre attacks begun on 19 February 1943. The Soviets were not aware of this major offensive operation before 24 February. The Red Army was convinced the Germans would continue their withdrawal. Initially, the attack was considered limited offensive to cover the retreat. The evacuation of Kharkov by the Germans reinforced this conviction. Thus the Soviets believed they were pursuing an already beaten enemy. Given the pace of operations, they had little time for reconnaissance.

In contrast, Manstein had a clear picture of the battlefield. He not only understood the strategy, tactics and doctrine of the Soviets; he also had a good picture of the situation mainly through air reconnaissance. In addition, Army Group South succeeded in deciphering the Soviet radio code. Thus, on February 18 he learned that the supply situation of Tank Group Popov was desperate. Together with the successful pre attacks on February 19 this information was a main building block for Manstein to issue his order.

The situation at Kursk was completely different. Here the Soviets had absolute information superiority. The Soviets knew the German plans and thanks to their Swiss based spy Lucy they knew even the exact time the attack would be initiated. Thus, it was possible to deliver a barrage directly before the attack into the German "jumping off" positions. The Germans knew also the location and strength of the Soviet positions but based on this knowledge, they postponed the attack to strengthen their farces with new tanks. This decision to delay only favored the enemy.

Strategic/Operational Importance

A comparison of Kharkov and Kursk is very instructive for the student of military affairs. At Kharkov, Manstein succeeded in stemming the flood of Soviet units flooding

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[62] Friedhelm Klein and Karl-Heinz Frieser, 16

westward. From the brink of a decisive defeat, he regained the initiative. In his own words, a stroke from the backhand, and reestablished a defensible frontline. In abiding with military principles discussed on the previous pages, he prevented the collapse of the entire German eastern front in the early spring of1943. Manstein sought to create the conditions for a political solution, for a remise peace with the Soviet Union, because he realized a military victory was not longer possible.[64] Indeed, after Kharkov, documents indicate that Stalin was willing to conclude a separate peace with Germany on the basis of the status quo before the German attack. Manstein's idea however, was not acceptable because Hitler's objectives in the east could not be achieved through a status quo.

Studying the battle of Kursk or comparing Kursk to Kharkov shows a student of military affairs how through inappropriate strategies and ignoring basic principles of war only poor results can be produced. The German failure at Kursk was caused for many reasons, as discussed previously, but perhaps the key reason was the absence of surprise. Despite the lack of surprise, however, "Zitadelle" ultimately failed because the German leadership-specifically Hitler- canceled it before a decision was reached. This decision contradicted every logic. When Hitler withdrew strong forces for Italy at that point in time, it was too late to prevent the Allied landing anyway and it doomed any possibility for success at Kursk. Had "Zitadelle" been continued, heavy Soviet casualties would have been very likely. With only a few more forces, namely infantry divisions, the offensive might have achieved a quick success. Additional infantry divisions could have relieved the first German penetration forces and countered the Soviet counterattacks. Of course, in terms of time "Zitadelle" started too late. Had it begun at the end of May or at the latest at the beginning of June, its possibility of success would have been considerably greater. In addition, the Soviets would have been hit before they could reestablish their whole operational capabilities.

But even a German success at Kursk would have not changed the situation decisively, in the eastern theater of war or in favor of the Hitler's Reich. The overall

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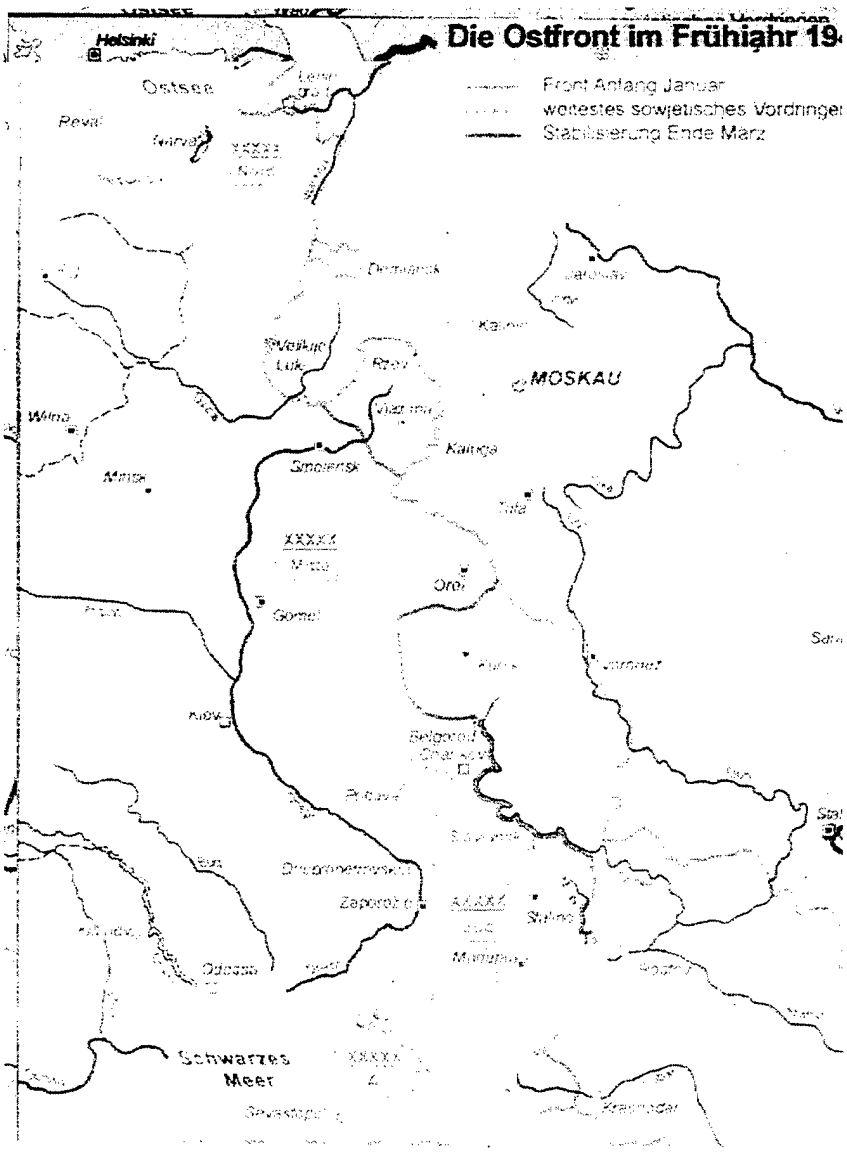
[63] FM 100-5, 2-5
[64] Manstein, 476

force ratio was simply against Germany. The latter course of the war on the eastern front shows, that the Soviets were so superior in numbers of soldiers and material, that they could have sustained multiple losses, like Kursk without loosing their capability for the offensive. For a successful conduct of the operations, in the sense of a strategic defense, Hitler would have had to be willing to take more risks- not only with regard to temporary surrender of space but also with regard to the employment of forces. For this other theaters of war in Norway, France and in the Balkans would have had to be thinned out and thus accepting a high strategic risk.

"Operation Zitadelle" would have been only an intermediate step toward the type of operations which had to follow like those Field Marshal von Manstein envisioned. Only by far flung operations out of the strategic defense, by taking advantage of the maneuverability of the tank divisions and the vastness of the space a change of the situation in the east might have been possible.

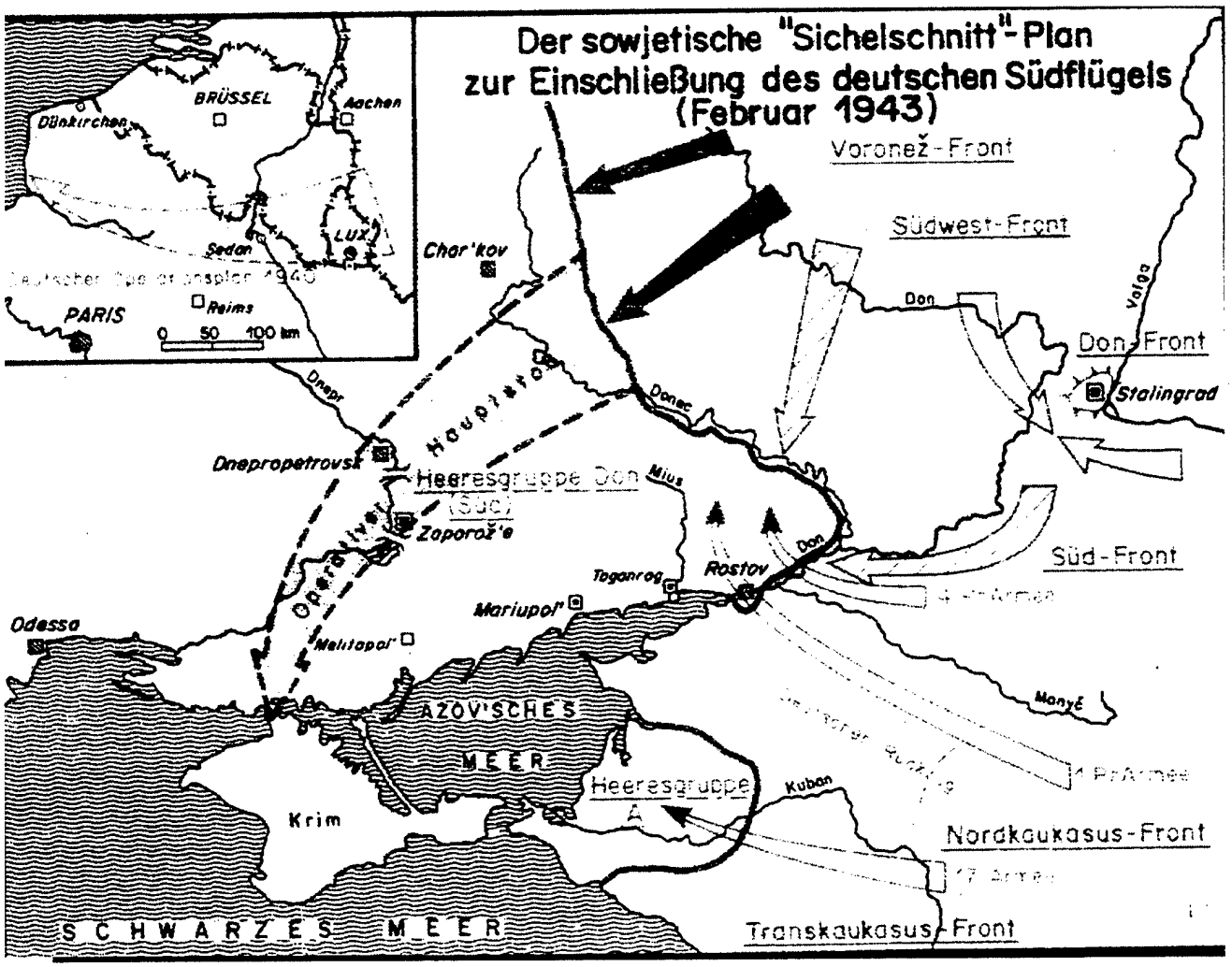
The battle of Kursk was not a decisive battle. However, it marks another turn. Because of a lack of risk acceptance and the connected fixation of the supreme German leadership to avoid far-flung operations under temporary surrender of space, the initiative slipped definitely away from the Wehrmacht. The alternative, the strategic offensive was no longer possible after Kursk due to the force ratio. Forced into the strategic defense, Hitler turned to hold tight to the occupied areas at any costs. The consequence was a series of attrition battles, that could not be won because of the overwhelming personnel and material superiority of the Allies.

Annex 1: The Eastern Front Spring 1943+



+ Graphic from Militaergeschichtliches Forschungsamt, Potsdam, Germany

Annex 2: Soviet Planning to Encircle the German Southern Wing+



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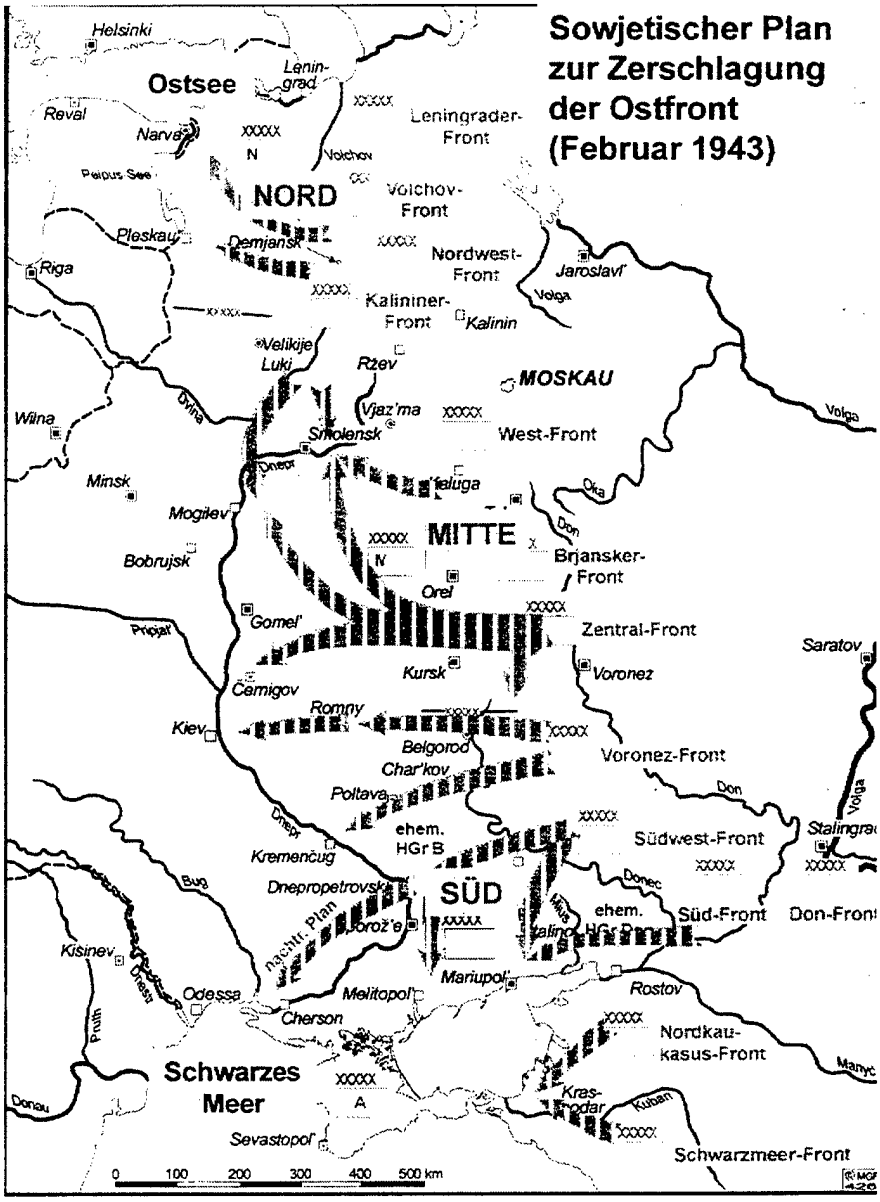
Annex 3:
Soviet Planning for the Destruction of the German Eastern Front February 1943+



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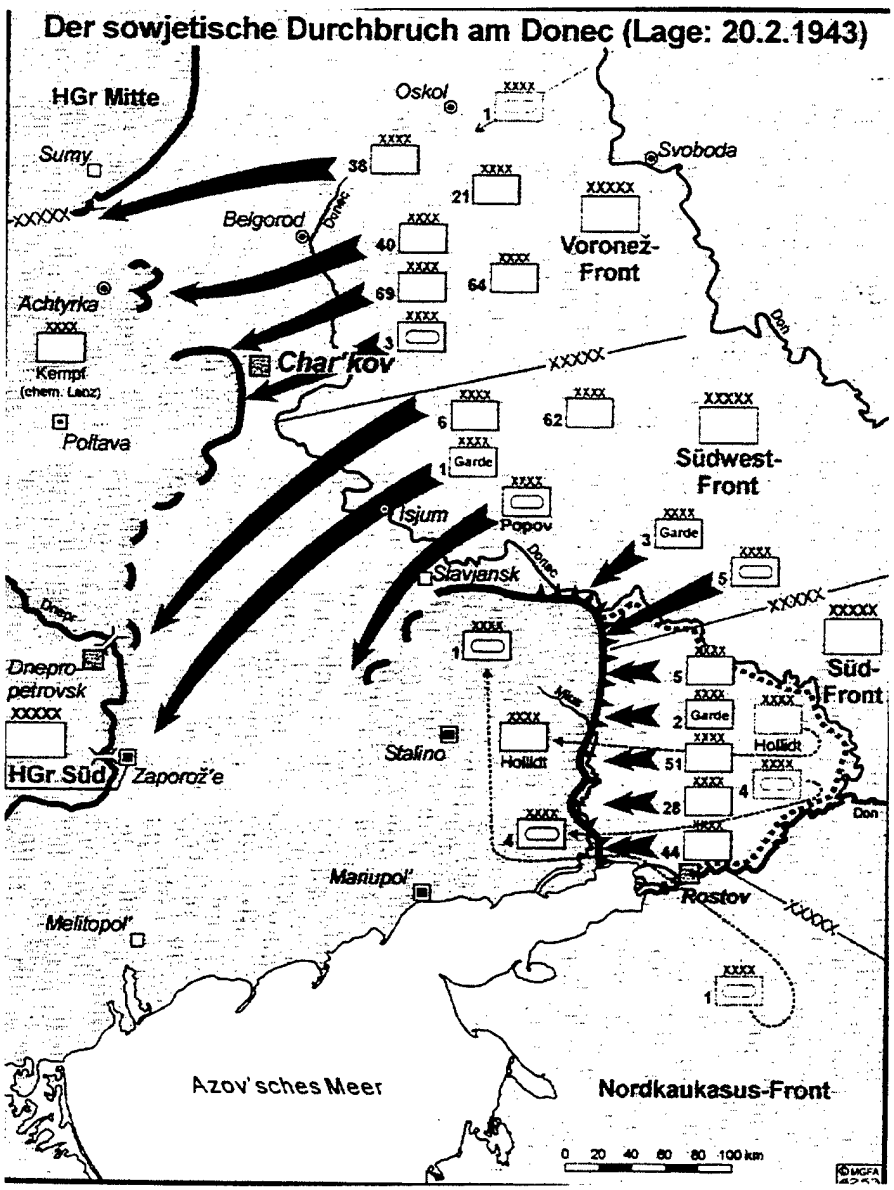
Annex 4: Difficult Task+



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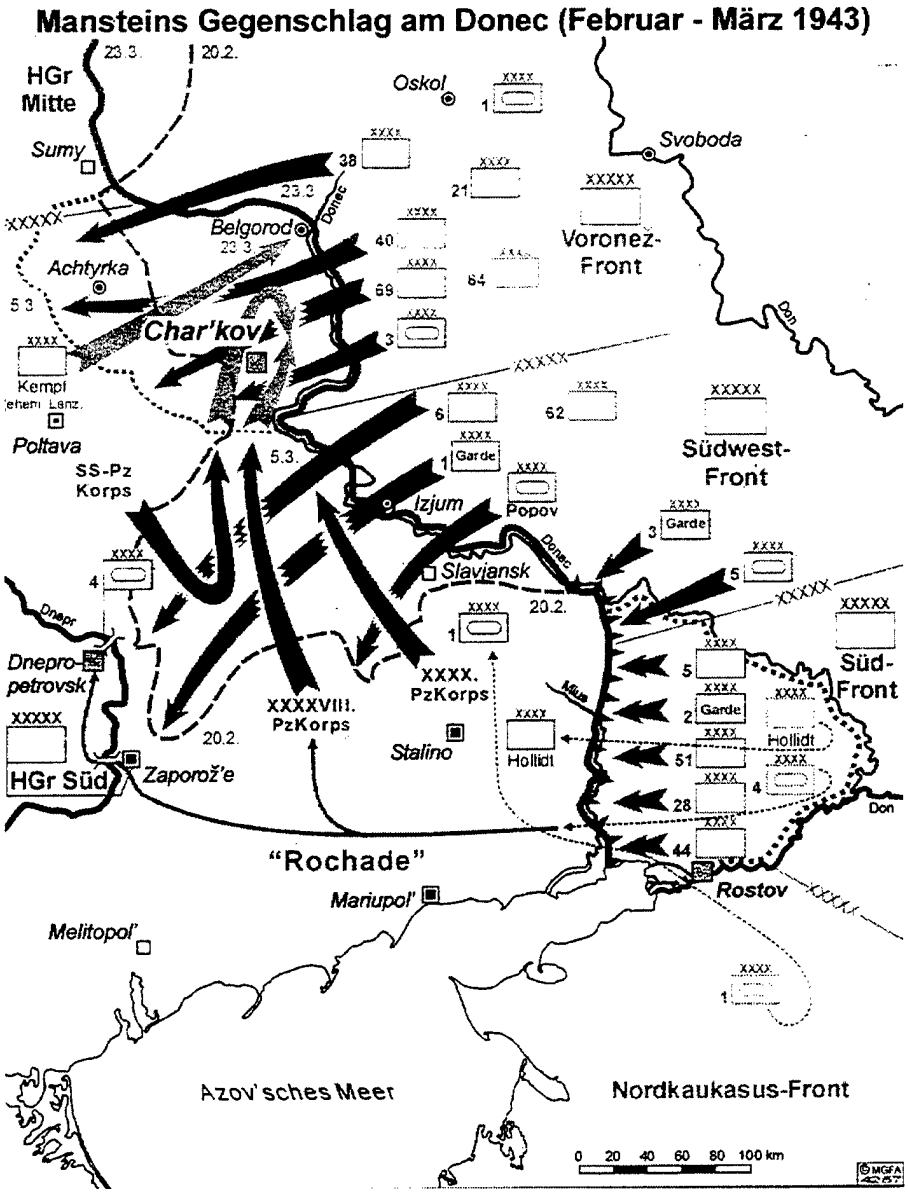
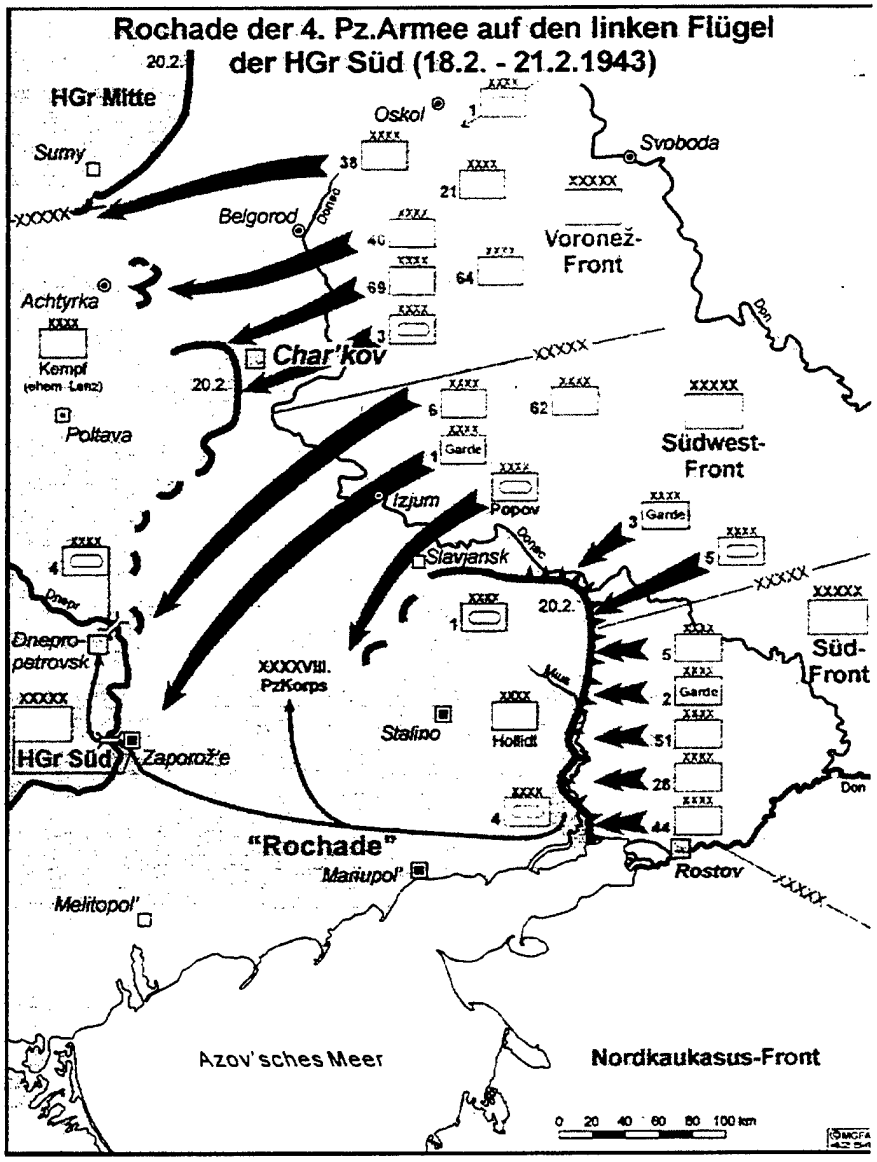
Annex 5: Operational Planning Army Group South+



+ Graphic from Militaergeschichtliches Forschungsamt, Potsdam, Germany

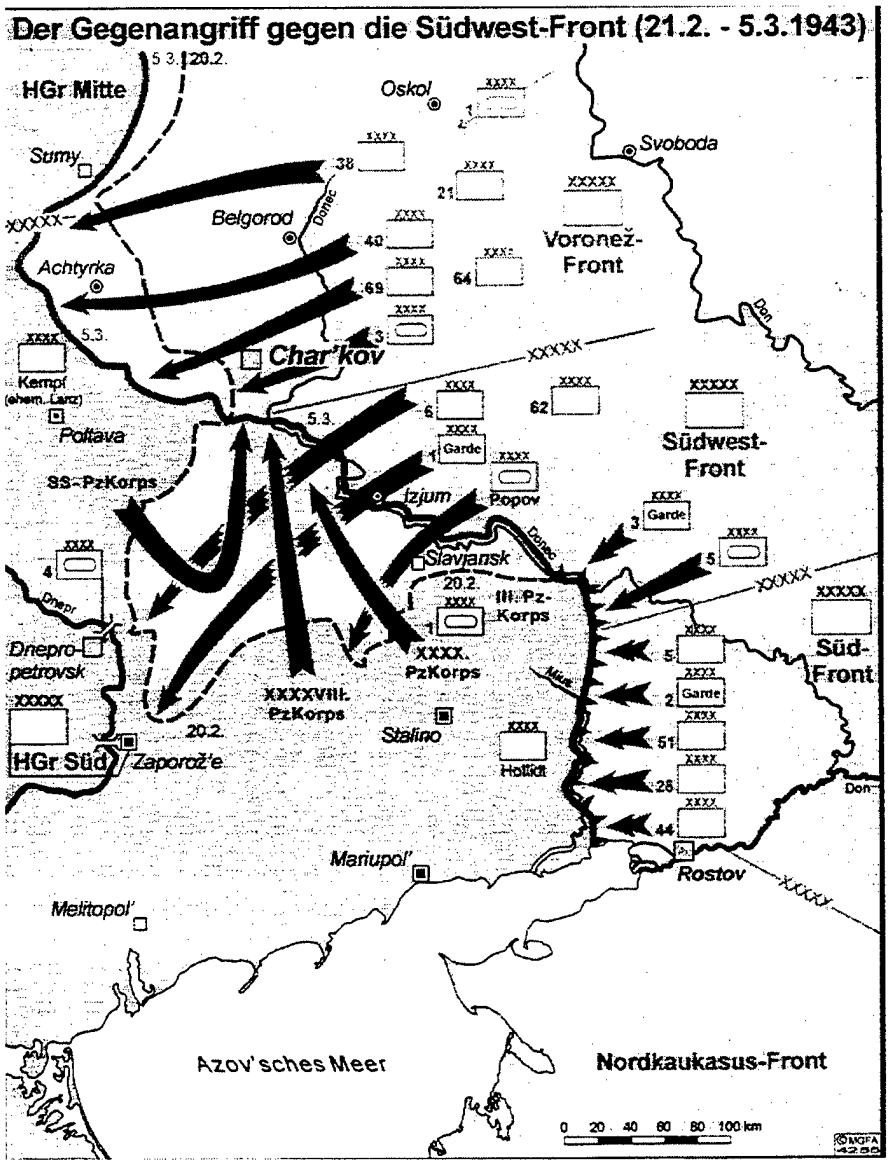
Annex 6: Phase 1 'Castling'+



+ Graphic from Militaergeschichtliches Forschungsamt, Potsdam, Germany

Annex 7: Phase 2

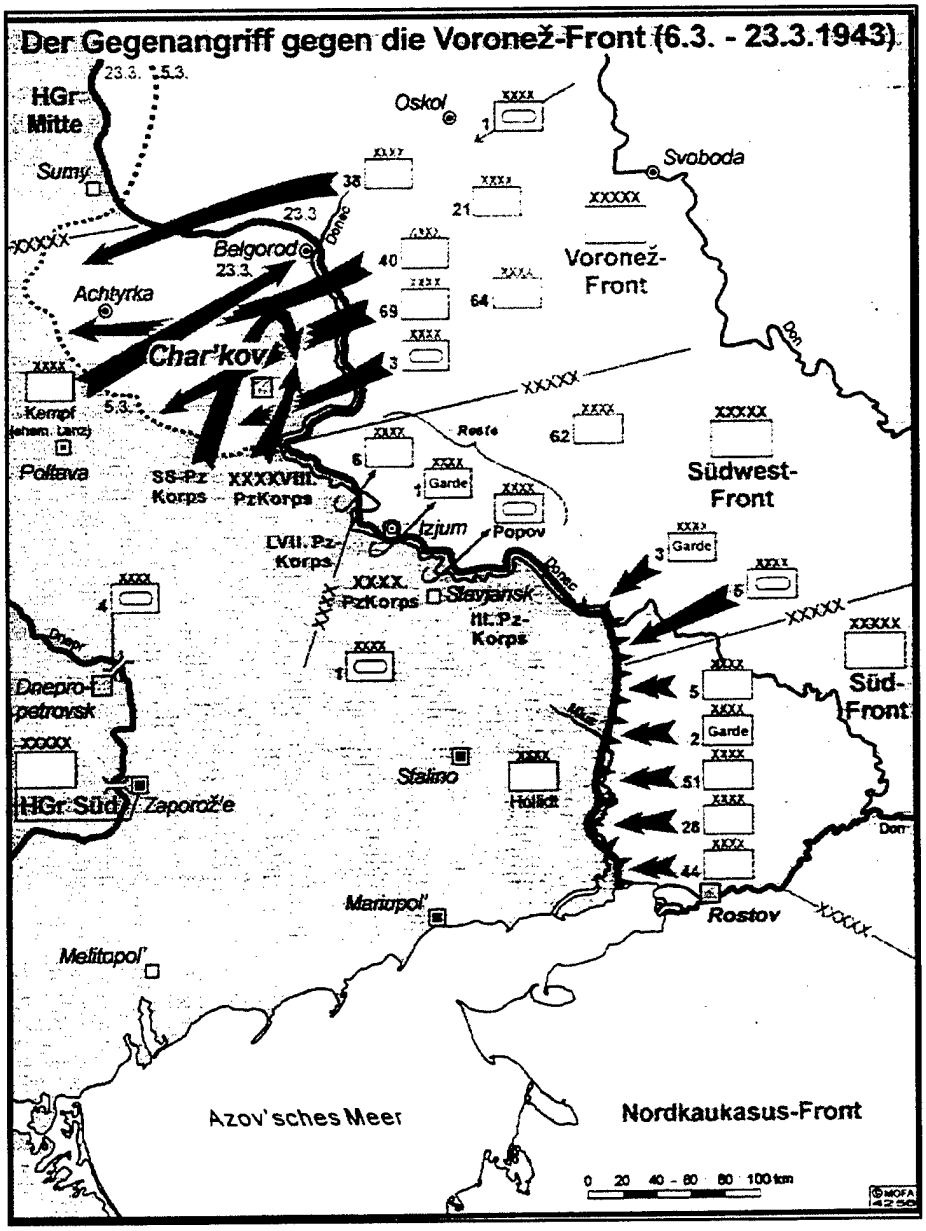
21 February to 5 March 1943+



+ Graphic from Militaergeschichtliches Forschungsamt, Potsdam, Germany

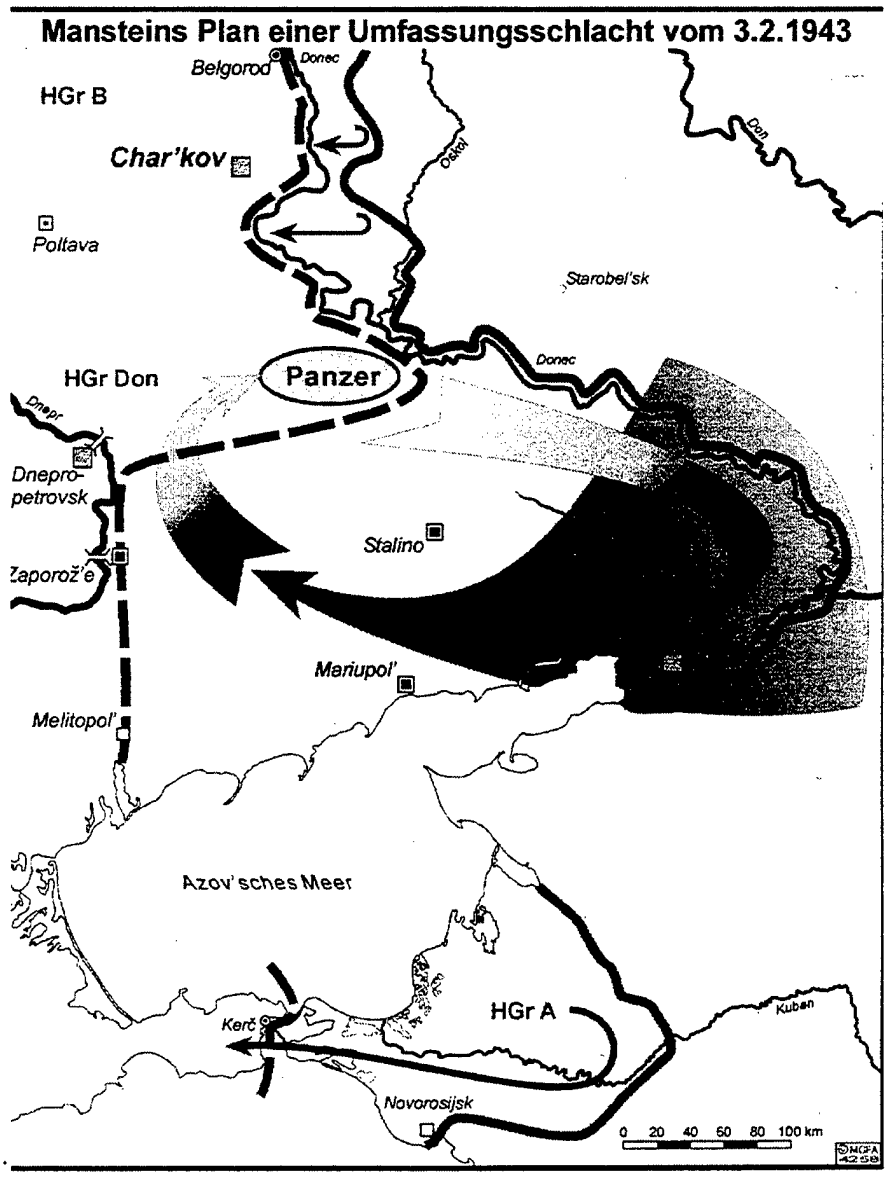
Annex 8: Phase 3

6 - 23 March 1943+



+ Graphic from Militaergeschichtliches Forschungsamt, Potsdam, Germany

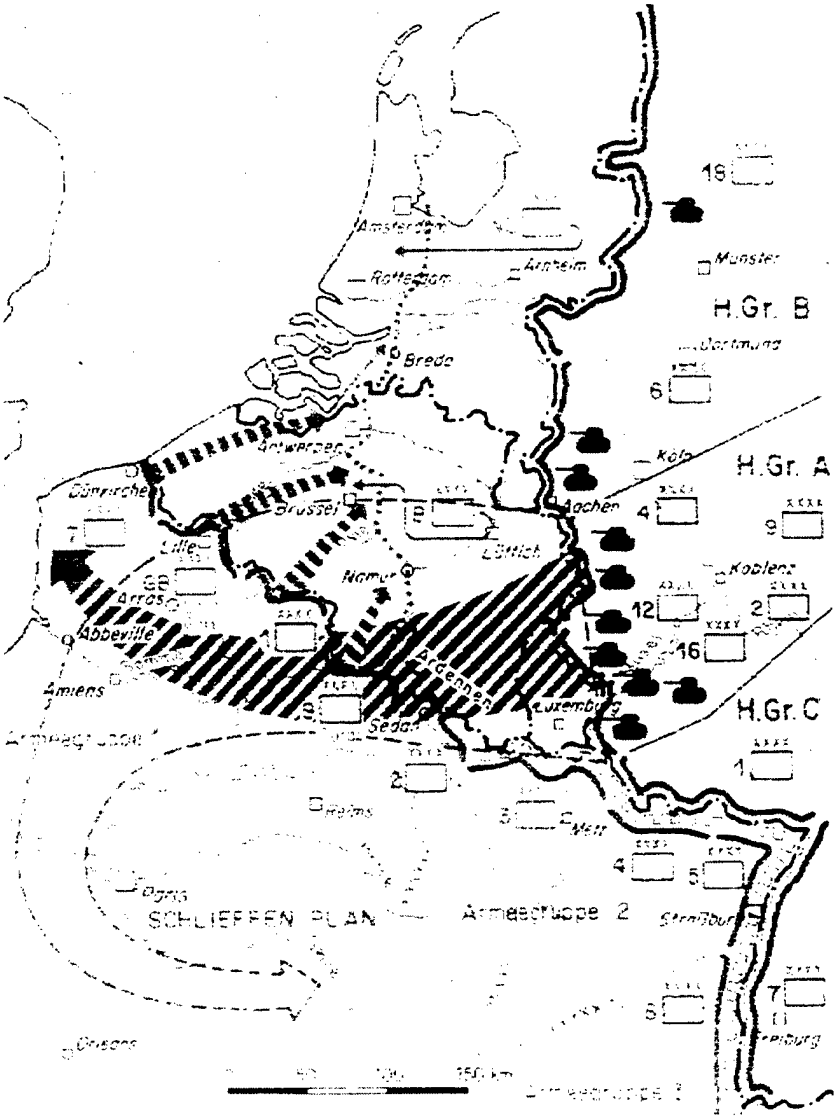
Annex 9: Manstein's Plan
Encirclement of Strong Soviet Forces
at the Sea of Azov+



+ Graphic from Militaergeschichtliches Forschungsamt, Potsdam, Germany

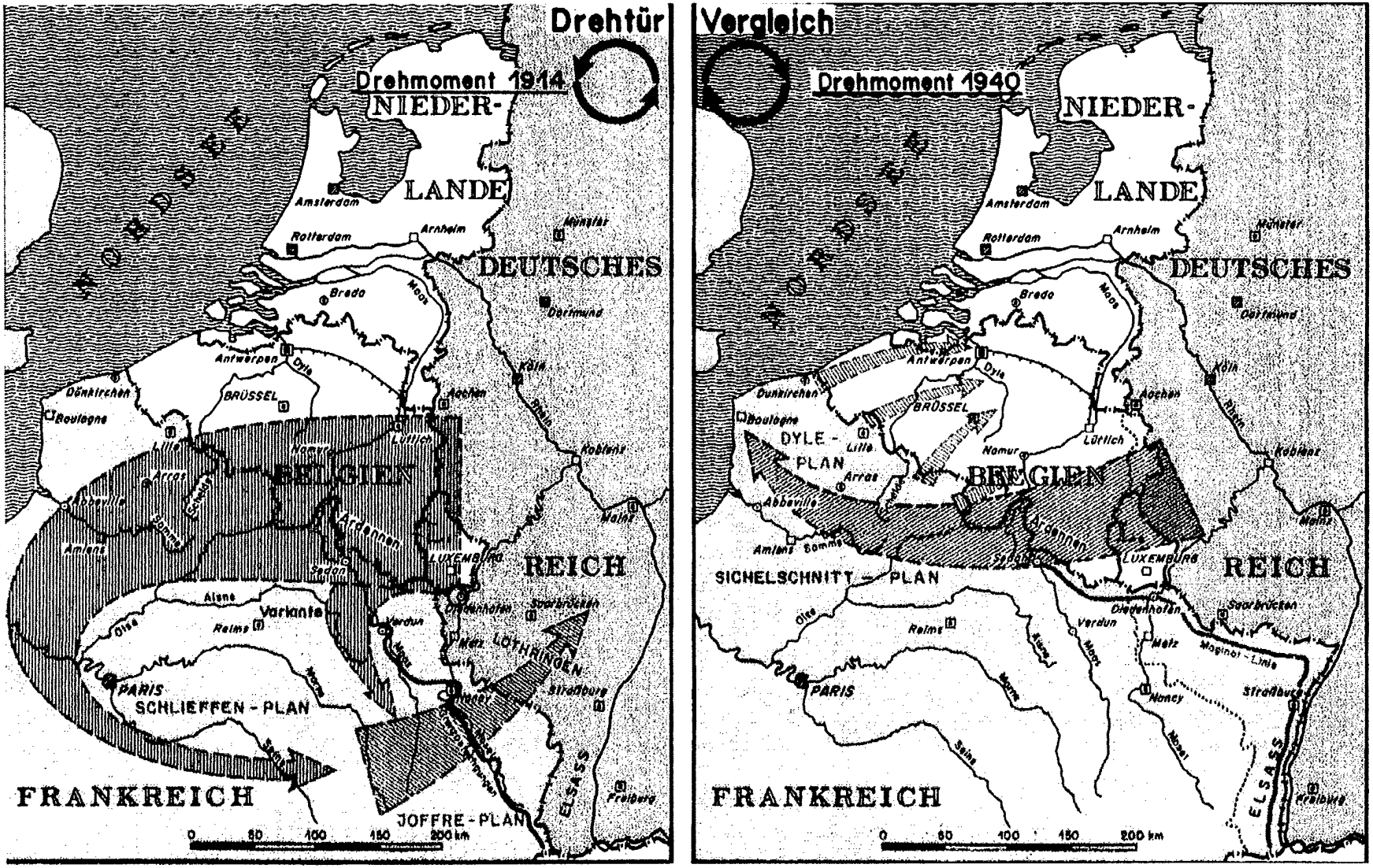
Annex 10: German and Allied Operational Planning in the West 1940+

Der deutsche und der alliierte Operationsplan 1940



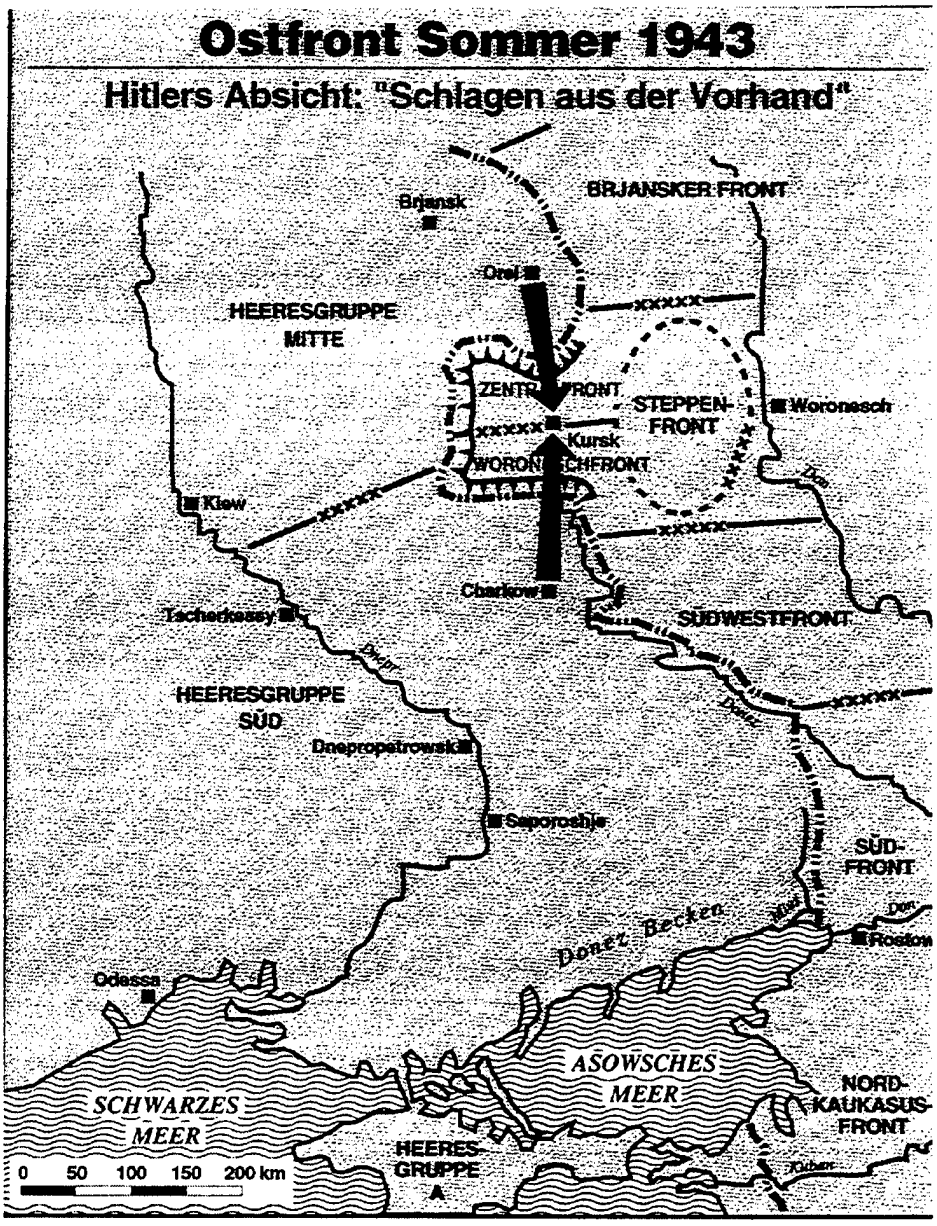
+ Graphic from Militaergeschichtliches Forschungsamt, Potsdam, Germany

Annex 11: Rotating Door+



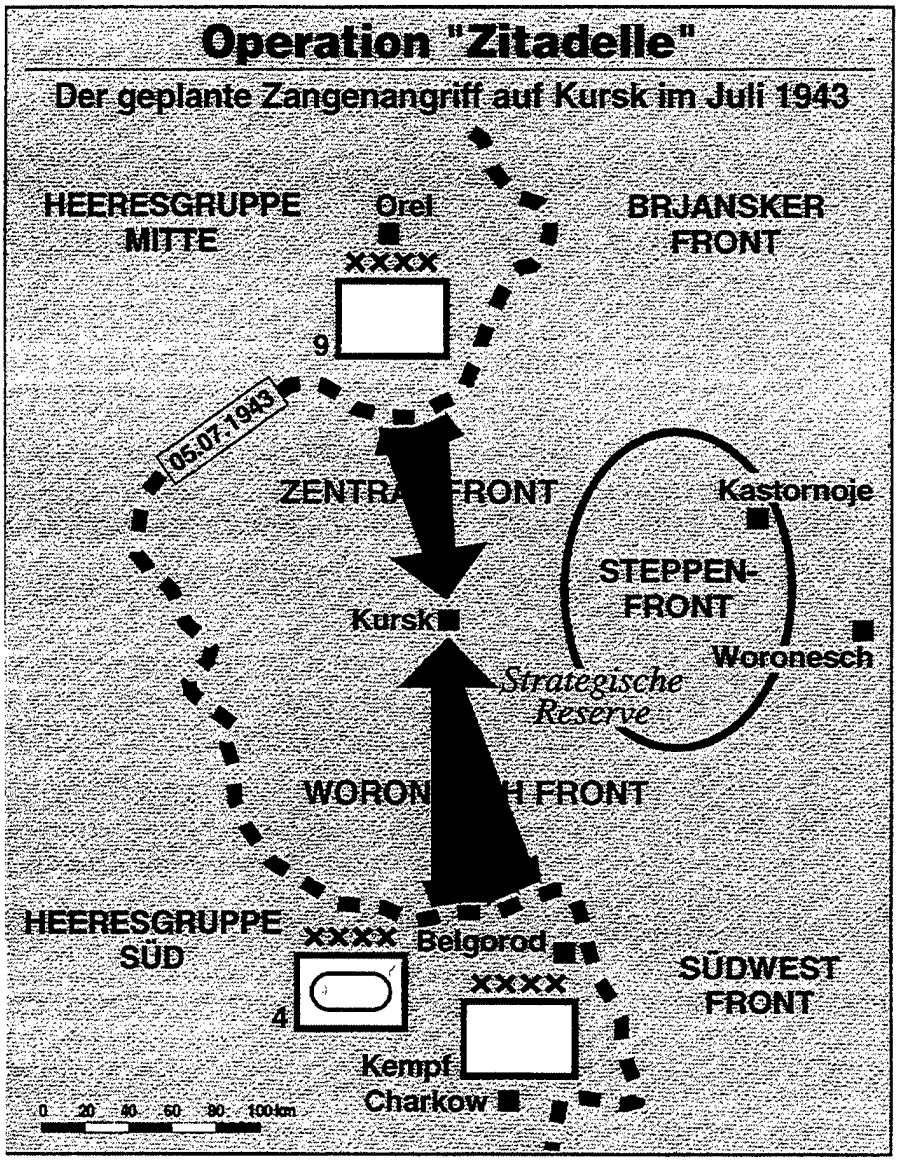
+ Graphic from Militaergeschichtliches Forschungsamt, Potsdam, Germany

Annex 12: "Strike from the Forehand"+



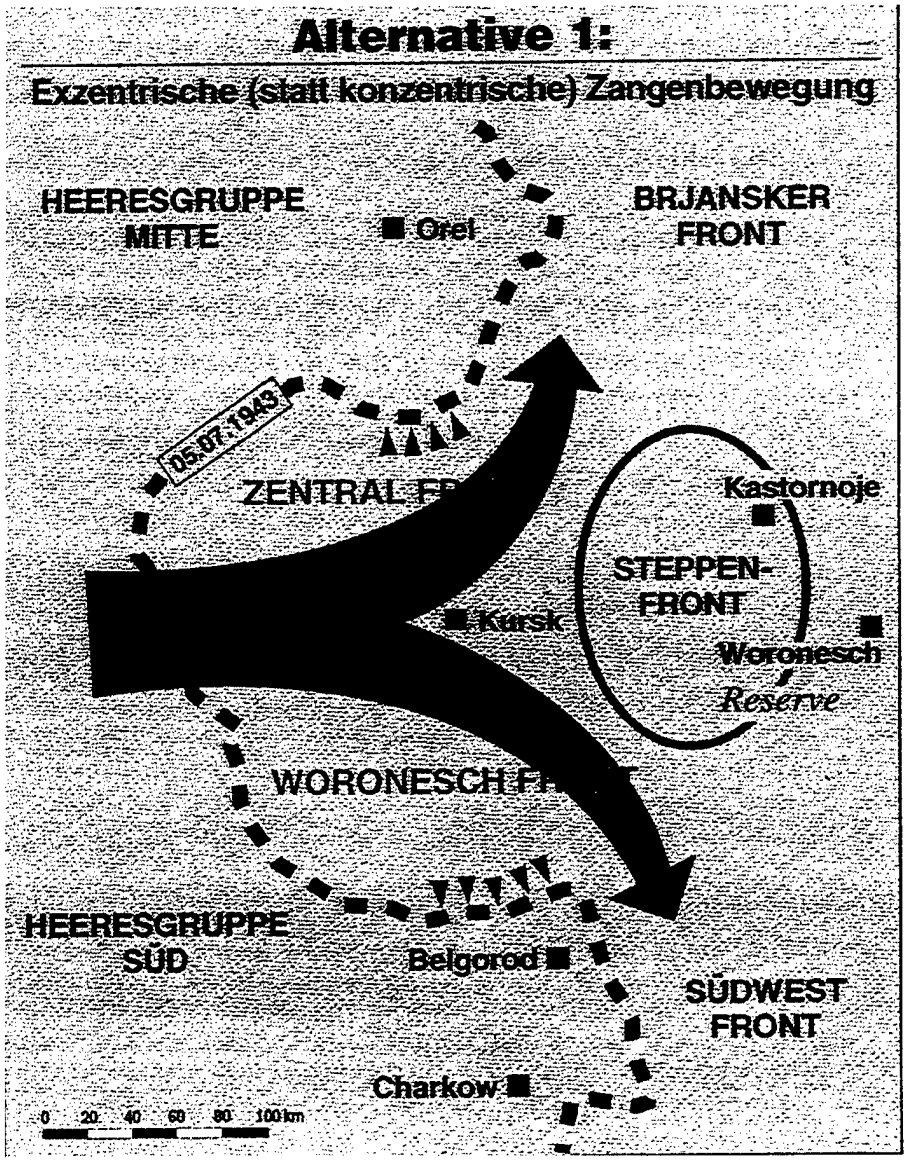
+ see also Frieser, 109

Annex 13: Planned Pincerattack at Kursk+



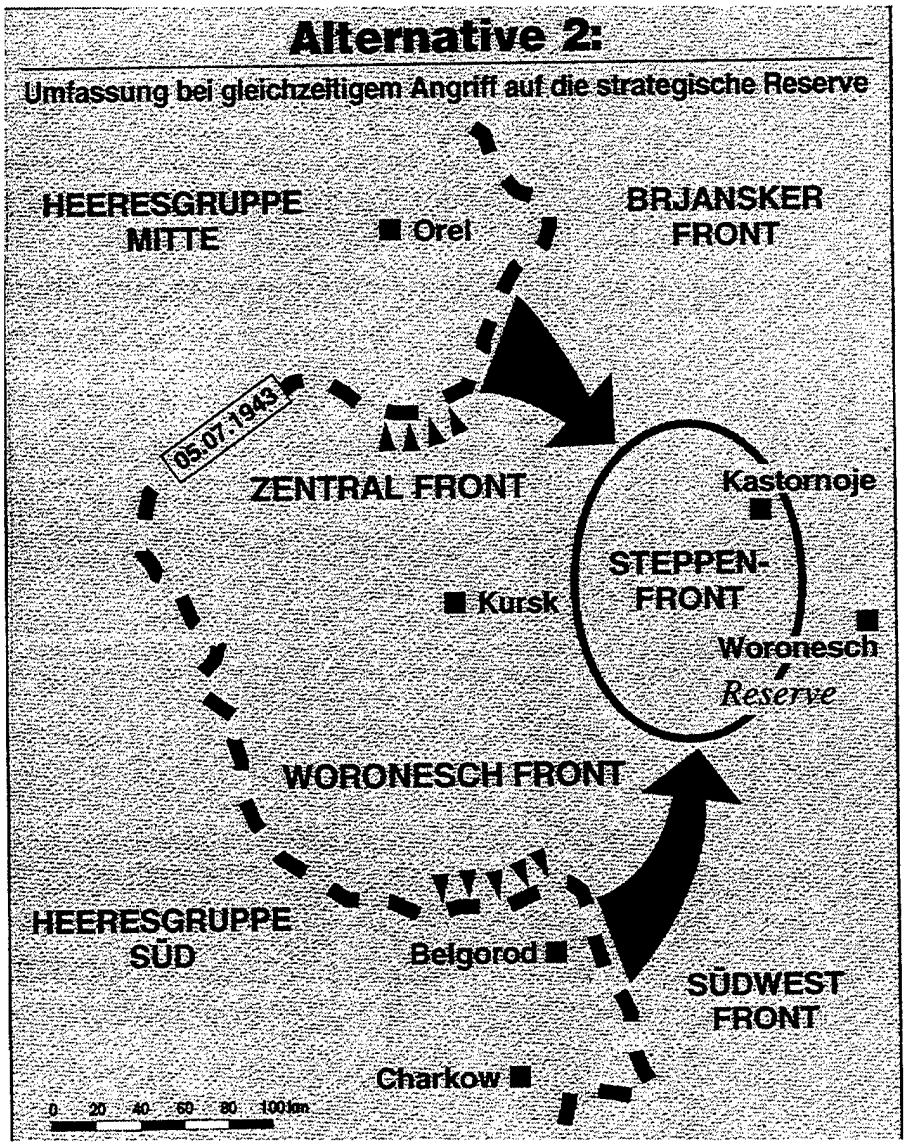
+ see also Frieser, 109

Annex 14: Alternative 1+



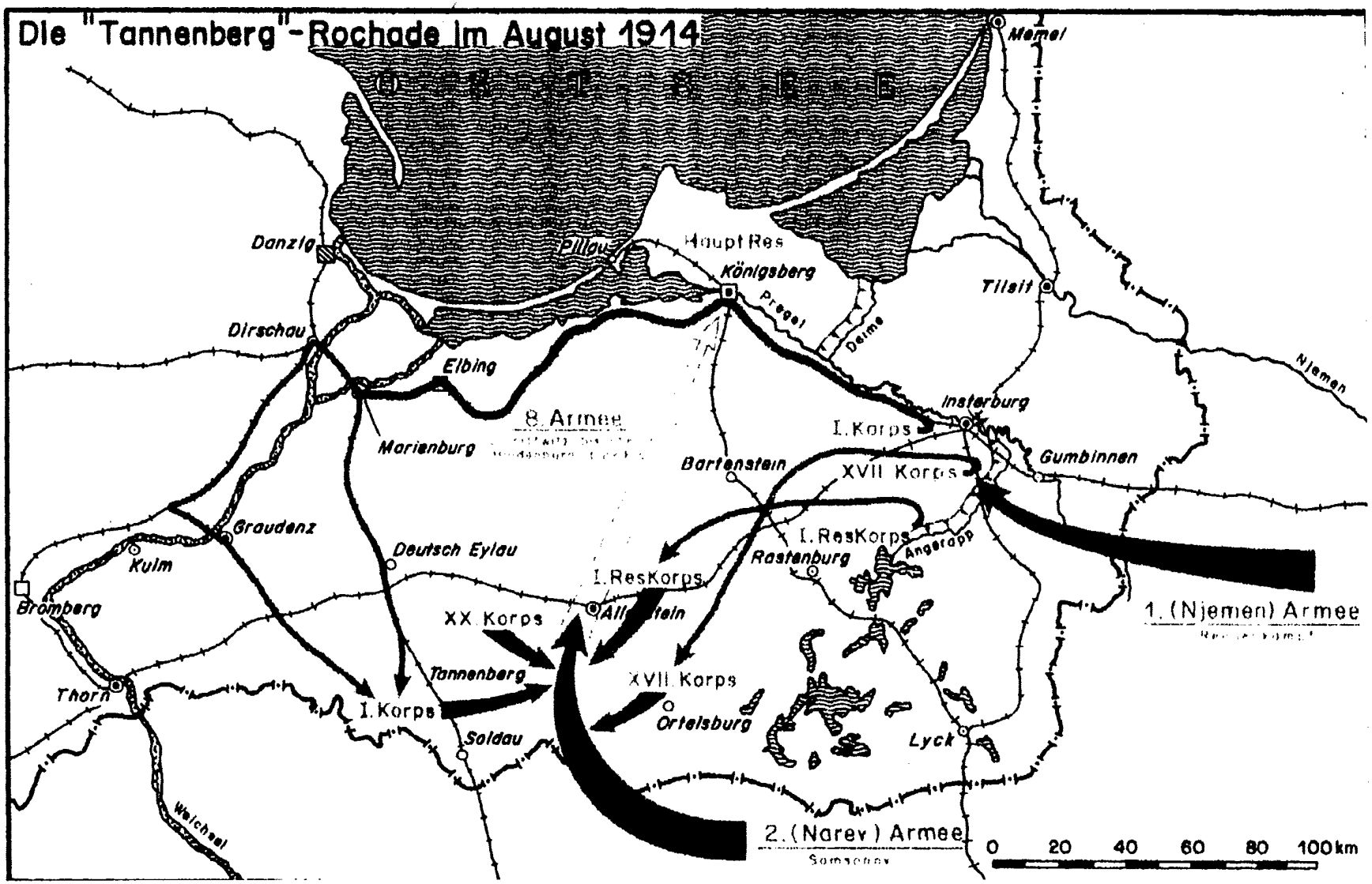
+ see also Frieser, 109

Annex 15: Alternative 2+



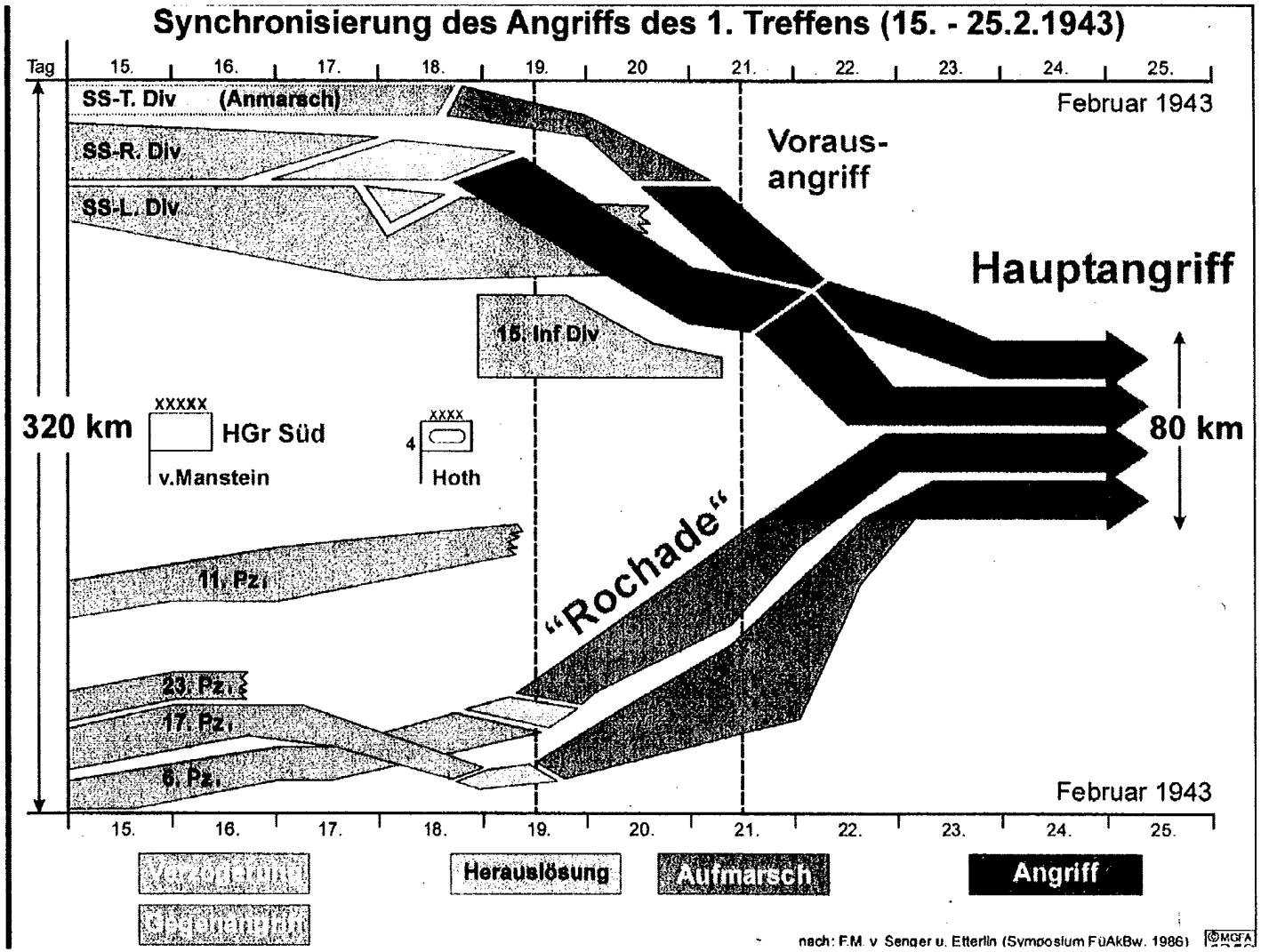
+ see also Frieser, 109

Annex 16: Tannenberg 1914+



+ Graphic from Militaergeschichtliches Forschungsamt, Potsdam, Germany

Annex 17: Synchronization+



+ Graphic form Militaergeschichtliches Forschungsamt, Potsdam, Germany

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