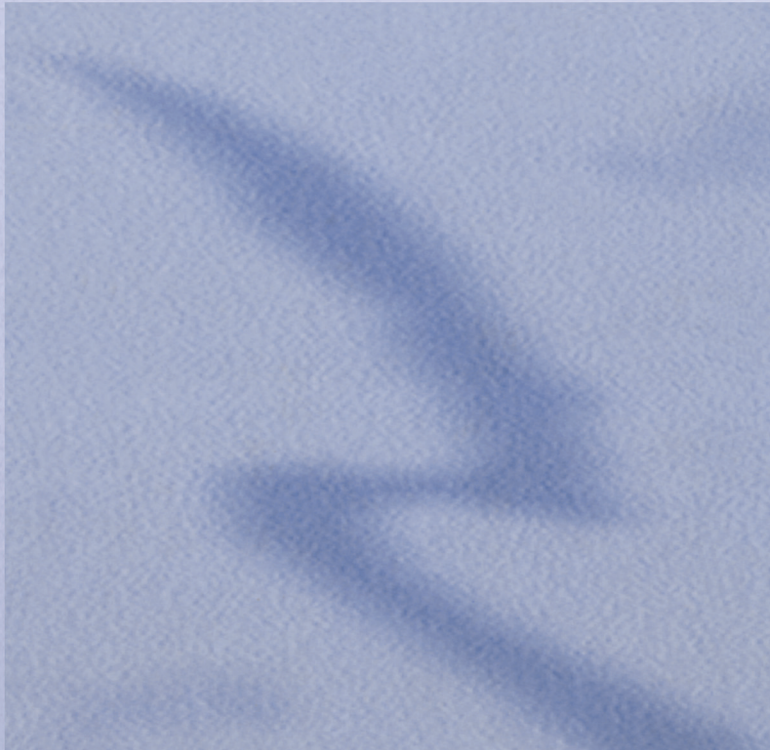


# **Kursk 1943**

A statistical analysis

Niklas Zetterling  
and Anders Frankson



CASS SERIES ON THE SOVIET (RUSSIAN) STUDY OF WAR  
Series Editor: David M. Glantz

**KURSK 1943**  
*A Statistical Analysis*

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# KURSK 1943

*A Statistical Analysis*

NIKLAS ZETTERLING  
and  
ANDERS FRANKSON



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# Contents

|   |      |
|---|------|
| List of Tables and Figures                          | vii  |
| List of Maps  | x    |
| Foreword by David M. Glantz                         | xi   |
| Preface   | xiii |
| List of Abbreviations                               | xvii |
| 1 Background  | 1    |
| 2 The Assembly of Forces                            | 15   |
| 3 Structure of Involved Forces                      | 25   |
| 4 Tanks Employed at Zitadelle                       | 58   |
| 5 The Air War                                       | 74   |
| 6 Chronology of the Offensive                       | 84   |
| 7 Prokhorovka                                       | 101  |
| 8 The Cost of the Battle                            | 111  |
| 9 An Analysis of the Battle                         | 132  |
| 10 The Consequences of the Battle                   | 145  |
| Appendices  |      |
| 1. <i>Soviet Order of Battle</i>                    | 153  |
| 2. <i>German Order of Battle</i>                    | 166  |
| 3. <i>Soviet Tank Units Facing Army Group South</i> | 174  |
| 4. <i>The Panther Tank in Zitadelle</i>             | 177  |

KURSK 1943

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| <i>5. Deliveries of New Tanks to the Eastern Front, June–August 1943</i>                    | 181 |
| <i>6. Daily Tank Strength in Army Group South</i>   | 185 |
| <i>7. The Condition of 8th Army, 30 August 1943</i>   | 191 |
| <i>8. Examples of Causes of German Tank Losses</i>  | 193 |
| <i>9. Number of German Tanks and Assault Guns on the Eastern Front, April–December 1943</i> | 195 |
| <i>10. Further Information on German Casualties</i>   | 197 |
| <i>11. Tank Data</i>  | 209 |
| <i>12. Tank and AT Gun Data</i>   | 211 |
| <i>13. Armour-Penetration Capabilities</i>  | 213 |
| <i>14. Information on German Tank Losses</i>  | 216 |
| <i>15. Ration Strength of the 4th Panzer Army</i>   | 224 |
| <i>16. Divisional Structure for German Forces on 4 July 1943</i>                            | 226 |
| <b>Bibliography</b>   | 238 |
| <b>Index</b>  | 263 |

# Tables and Figures

## TABLES

|  | <i>page</i> |
|--|-------------|
| 1.1 Comparative strength, 1 July 1942  | 2           |
| 1.2 Comparative strength, 1 July 1943  | 5           |
| 1.3 Soviet strength in the Kursk area, 10 April 1943   | 11          |
| 2.1 German strength in the Kursk area, 1 July 1943   | 18          |
| 2.2 German combat units in the Kursk area, 1 July 1943   | 19          |
| 2.3 Soviet strength in the Kursk area, 1 July 1943   | 20          |
| 2.4 Soviet combat units in the Kursk area, 1 July 1943   | 21          |
| 3.1 656th Tank Destroyer Regiment, 4 July 1943   | 27          |
| 3.2 Tanks and SP artillery of divisions in XXXXVII<br>Panzer Corps in early July 1943  | 27          |
| 3.3 Distribution of tanks and SP artillery available in Model's<br>Mobile Reserve in early July 1943                           | 28          |
| 3.4 Distribution of tanks, assault guns and SP artillery within<br>mobile divisions of XXXXVIII Pz Corps in early<br>July 1943 | 29          |
| 3.5 Distribution of tanks, assault guns and SP artillery within<br>the mobile divisions of II SS-Pz Corps in early July 1943   | 30          |
| 3.6 Distribution of tanks, assault guns and SP artillery within<br>the panzer divisions of III Pz Corps in early July 1943     | 31          |
| 3.7 Distribution of tanks and assault guns in von Manstein's<br>Mobile Reserve in early July 1943                              | 31          |
| 3.8 Attacking forces on 4 July 1943  | 32          |
| 3.9 Central Front anti-tank reserve  | 34          |
| 3.10 23rd Guards Rifle Corps' arsenal of guns, 4 July 1943   | 35          |
| 3.11 Voronezh Front anti-tank reserve  | 36          |
| 3.12 Tank strength in 1st Tank Army  | 37          |
| 3.13 Ration strength compared with combat strength in German<br>divisions, 4 July 1943   | 38          |

KURSK 1943

|      |   |     |
|------|---|-----|
| 3.14 | Combat strength in battalions of 6th ID, 31st ID and 20th PzD                               | 39  |
| 3.15 | German infantry division T/O&E strength   | 41  |
| 3.16 | German artillery in infantry divisions  | 41  |
| 3.17 | German anti-tank guns in infantry divisions   | 42  |
| 3.18 | Number of anti-tank guns in some infantry divisions, 1 July 1943                            | 42  |
| 3.19 | Anti-tank battalions in 6th and 167th Infantry Divisions                                    | 43  |
| 3.20 | German infantry divisions, 4 July 1943  | 44  |
| 3.21 | Units in a panzer division and a GD or SS panzergrenadier division compared                 | 45  |
| 3.22 | Initial AFV strength for the panzer divisions, 4 July 1943                                  | 46  |
| 3.23 | T/O&E of SPWs in I (armoured battalion)/12th Panzergrenadier Regiment (4th Panzer Division) | 46  |
| 3.24 | Soviet tank army, 1943  | 47  |
| 3.25 | The five tank armies present in July 1943   | 48  |
| 3.26 | Number of tanks and self-propelled guns in Soviet tank armies in August 1943                | 49  |
| 3.27 | Organization of a Soviet tank corps, July 1943  | 49  |
| 3.28 | Organization of tank corps deployed on the Voronezh and Central Fronts, 4 July 1943         | 50  |
| 3.29 | Organization of tank corps reinforcing Voronezh Front during Zitadelle                      | 50  |
| 3.30 | T/O&E of a Soviet tank brigade, July 1943   | 51  |
| 3.31 | Soviet independent tank corps in the defensive phase, July 1943                             | 51  |
| 3.32 | Organization of Soviet mechanized corps, July 1943  | 52  |
| 4.1  | Deployment of Tiger tanks engaged in operation Zitadelle, July 1943                         | 59  |
| 4.2  | Independent StuG battalions, 4 July 1943  | 65  |
| 4.3  | Divisional StuG battalions, 4 July 1943   | 66  |
| 5.1  | Numbers of aircraft in Soviet air army units on 4 July 1943                                 | 76  |
| 5.2  | German air losses between 5 and 15 July 1943  | 77  |
| 5.3  | Soviet air losses, 5–8 July 1943  | 78  |
| 7.1  | Operational tanks and assault guns with Army Detachment Kempf, 11–15 July 1943              | 102 |
| 7.2  | II SS-Pz Corps' operational tanks and assault guns, 11–16 July 1943                         | 103 |
| 7.3  | II SS-Pz Corps' manpower losses, 11–16 July 1943  | 105 |
| 7.4  | Soviet tanks and SP guns in 5th Guards Tank Army, 12 July 1943                              | 106 |

#### TABLES AND FIGURES

|      |   |     |
|------|---|-----|
| 7.5  | Distribution of 5th Guards Tank Army attacking units                        | 107 |
| 8.1  | Casualties suffered by the German 9th Army                                  | 113 |
| 8.2  | Casualties suffered by Army Detachment Kempf, 4–20 July 1943                | 114 |
| 8.3  | Casualties suffered by 4th Panzer Army, 4–20 July 1943                      | 115 |
| 8.4  | German casualties, June–September 1943                                      | 116 |
| 8.5  | German casualties on the eastern front for each army, 1 July–31 August 1943 | 117 |
| 8.6  | Casualties suffered by the Red Army during operation Zitadelle              | 119 |
| 8.7  | Casualties suffered by the Red Army during major operations in summer 1943  | 119 |
| 8.8  | Destroyed tanks in Army Group Centre, 5–14 July 1943                        | 121 |
| 8.9  | Tank losses among units in Army Group Centre during July 1943               | 121 |
| 8.10 | Destroyed tanks in Army Group South, 5–17 July 1943                         | 122 |
| 8.11 | German aircraft losses and sorties during Zitadelle                         | 123 |
| 8.12 | Losses in 2nd Tank Army during the defensive phase, July 1943               | 126 |
| 8.13 | Equipment losses of the Red Army during major operations in summer 1943     | 127 |
| 10.1 | German tanks and assault guns sent to the eastern front during 1943         | 147 |
| 10.2 | German tank and assault gun losses on the eastern front, July–December 1943 | 148 |

#### FIGURES

|      |  |     |
|------|--|-----|
| 10.1 | German tanks on the eastern front, April–December 1943                       | 146 |
| 10.2 | Accumulated German casualties on the eastern front, 22 June 1941–31 May 1944 | 150 |

# Maps

|   |             |
|---|-------------|
|   | <i>page</i> |
| 1. The eastern front, 1942–43                                   | 3           |
| 2. Central Front defensive dispositions                         | 7           |
| 3. 9th Army attacks, 5–6 July                                   | 86          |
| 4. 9th Army attacks, 11–12 July                                 | 89          |
| 5. XLVIII Panzer Corps attacks, 5–10 July                       | 93          |
| 6. German territorial gains in the Prokhorovka area, 12–15 July | 104         |

## Series Editor's Foreword

Midway through the Soviet–German War of 1941–45, in July 1943, the German Wehrmacht and the Soviet Red Army fought one of the most titanic battles in military history in the region around the Russian city of Kursk. Along with Stalingrad, the name Kursk was etched into historical record and people's minds to symbolize the nature of a war whose scale, ferocity, costs and consequences were both unprecedented and unfathomable. The Battle of Kursk's fame has rested on two distinct pillars. First, historians have portrayed it, and the accompanying massive tank encounter at Prokhorovka, as the greatest tank battle in history. Second, they have described the battle as the principal turning point in the war, when the Red Army defeated German Blitzkrieg and set the Soviet Union on the path toward victory over Nazi Germany.

Its fame notwithstanding, the Battle of Kursk has also generated a mythology of its own, one which evolved largely because of the paucity of reliable source materials necessary to document all aspects of its conduct. In short, Kursk also came to symbolize how little Westerners and even Russian citizens themselves knew about a battle and a war that so materially shaped the fate of the Soviet nation and its peoples, if not of Europe and the world as a whole. Most accounts of the battle were based either on recollections of Germans who fought there or on research undertaken by Soviet historians. As often as not, the latter were writing as much to demonstrate how Soviet socialism had triumphed over Western capitalism or to educate their military establishment, as to relate an accurate picture of the battle. To be sure, these histories contained more than just a grain of truth. For example, they described when and where the battle was fought, why, and to what effect with fair accuracy. Even here, however, German and Soviet historians differed over what constituted the battle's definition in terms of scope and duration. Owing to the relative paucity of archival materials on the Soviet side, however, they had greater difficulty addressing how the battle was fought or at what cost. Nor were

## KURSK 1943

the historians on either side able to state precisely what made the battle and its Prokhorovka engagement the largest tank battle in history, instead relying on the time-honored statement that 1,200–1,500 tanks met in combat on the field of Prokhorovka.

Nonetheless, recent histories have begun to address and dispel these myths. The doors to the Soviet archives are slowly opening, and the Russian government has been releasing archival materials and semi-archival studies, and Western authors have been preparing new studies that exploit German archival materials to a greater extent than before.<sup>1</sup> Others have written more complete and definitive histories based on these sources about how both sides conducted the battle.<sup>2</sup> Yet, as is the case with the war as a whole, the process of illuminating the Battle of Kursk is an incremental one that is likely to continue for some time.

One of the most vexing aspects of the Battle of Kursk has been the absence of reliable data concerning the strength of and losses suffered by both sides in the struggle. This is all the more perplexing, since, although available, requisite materials on the German side have yet to be exploited fully. The publication of this book corrects that long-standing deficiency. Within the context of a sound chronological narrative of the battle, Zetterling and Frankson offer an imposing statistical analysis of the Battle of Kursk. By exploiting all available German archival sources, they offer a definitive view of the strength, losses, and loss rates of German forces, particularly panzer, during the Battle of Kursk. They juxtapose this against a fair representation of like figures on the Red Army side. In doing so, the authors put to rest many of the myths concerning the battle and offer a work that superbly complements the best of new literature now appearing about the battle. One can only hope that the Russians will respond to this volume's candor by releasing appropriate data on the Red Army; but until they do, this book will justifiably remain the last word on the subject.

DAVID M. GLANTZ  
*Carlisle, PA, March 2000*

## NOTES

1. See, for example, David M. Glantz and Harold S. Orenstein, trans. and ed., *The Battle for Kursk 1943: The Soviet General Staff Study* (London: Frank Cass, 1999), and George M. Nipe Jr, *Decision in the Ukraine Summer 1943, II SS and III Panzerkorps* (Winnipeg, Canada: J. J. Fedorowicz, 1996).
2. See, for example, David M. Glantz and Jonathan M. House, *The Battle of Kursk* (Lawrence, KS and London: University Press of Kansas and Ian Allen, 1999 and 2000).

# Preface

Several years have passed since we began working on this book and it is difficult to recollect why the work was initiated. Probably it began with the bewilderment we felt. This was caused by the different definitions of the battle we found in the literature. After a while two main definitions crystallized and it became clear that they originated from the different perspectives of the battle held by the Germans and the Soviets during the war. According to official Soviet history, the Battle of Kursk began on 5 July 1943 and ended on 23 August 1943. The battle is divided into three parts, the defensive phase, the offensive against Orel and the offensive against Belgorod–Kharkov. For the Germans these formed three different battles, Operation Zitadelle, the summer fighting around Orel and the fourth battle of Kharkov. The main reason for this is probably that Army Group South had to shift forces from Operation Zitadelle to fight along the Mius river far to the south and then react to another Soviet offensive directed against Belgorod–Kharkov. Our aim with this book is to make a thorough analysis of Operation Zitadelle or, to use the Soviet definition of the battle, only the defensive phase of the Battle of Kursk.

This was the first problem we encountered, but further difficulties appeared. The second was that despite claims that the battle did produce losses from which the German army never recovered, no previous author seems to have made any serious effort to establish the level of German losses. This is surprising, considering that the answer can be found in the German Military Archives in Freiburg (or in the copy-documents on microfilm in the National Archives in Washington, DC). Instead many figures of dubious background have been reiterated.

Third, the balance of forces has been sketchily described at best. This is also surprising, since material for this can be readily found, both with regard to the overall situation and to the engagements within the frame of the battle.

Fourth, in many cases the use of sources has been at fault. It is our

conviction, for example, that information on losses must not be taken from sources on the opposing side. This is valid for the battle studied here, as well as for most other military operations. Consequently, both Soviet and German sources must be used in parallel. In this book we have tried to do this. In references for sources concerning the Soviet side the reader may occasionally find titles in German. Unless otherwise noted, these are Soviet books translated into German, usually in the former East Germany.

Fifth, more can be done to put the battle in its proper perspective, to give it the role it actually played during the war. How decisive was the battle? What were the short and long term effects? Was it the 'Swan song of German armour'?

Sixth, many errors in details persist, errors that could have been eradicated with little effort long ago had it not been for a tendency among writers to rewrite what a previous author had already written, without carefully checking the facts against other sources.

These points provided our ambitions for the present work. It is for the reader to judge whether they have been achieved.

We would also like to add a comment on the sources. Since at least the 1970s there has been a strong faction that has argued that the history of the eastern front has largely been dominated by the German view. Superficially this may seem plausible, but closer scrutiny reveals several flaws with this line of argument. Mainly there is not one 'German view', rather there are several. The sources available from the German side are many: archival documents, memoirs, various publications by more or less skilled historians, etc. These do not present a unified 'view'.

Second, it is not true to say that the history of the eastern front has been conditioned by German sources. Judging from the literature published in English on the battle at Kursk, it seems that a majority of the information originates from post-war Soviet publications. Often these are better described as propagandist rather than sincere and skilled attempts at uncovering the truth. Hence, almost all information given in English-language publications on German strength and losses is wrong, and is often considerably off the mark.

This book is based mainly on research in the German military archives. For this operation it is obvious that this source has been used far too little, and it seems that this is also true for many of the other battles on the eastern front. It is understandable that Soviet archival documents have been virtually unused by Western historians before the present decade. However, it is difficult to understand why the German archives, which have long been available, have been so little used.

## PREFACE

We are indebted to John and Ljubica Erickson for helping us with material when we started this project. This has been very useful to us. We also want to thank Charles C. Sharp for providing us with material we needed. Mr Chris Lawrence at the Dupuy Institute has taken time to discuss some questions we had concerning the reliability of various items of information. Dr Alfred Price kindly allowed us to quote from one of his books. We are grateful for the assistance and help we have received from the staff at Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv (Freiburg), Lietuvos Nacionaline Martyno Mazvydo Biblioteka (Vilnius) and Försvarshögskolans bibliotek (Stockholm).

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# Abbreviations

|        |   |
|--------|---|
| AA     | anti-aircraft   |
| A/C    | armoured car  |
| AG     | assault gun   |
| AP     | armour piercing   |
| Arko   | Artillery Commander   |
| Art    | artillery   |
| AT     | anti-tank   |
| Aufkl  | <i>Aufklärung</i> , reconnaissance                            |
| BA-MA  | Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg                          |
| Bde    | brigade   |
| Bef    | <i>Befehls</i> , command (adjectival prefix)                  |
| Bn     | battalion   |
| Bty    | battery   |
| Coy    | company   |
| Eng    | engineer  |
| Fkl    | <i>Funk-lenk</i> , remote-controlled                          |
| Flak   | <i>Fliegerabwehrkanone</i> , anti-aircraft gun                |
| Flamm  | <i>Flammpanzer</i> , flame-thrower equipped tank              |
| GD     | <i>Großdeutschland</i> , Greater Germany (name on a division) |
| Gds    | guards  |
| Geb    | <i>Gebirgs</i> , mountain (adjective – type of soldiery)      |
| GHQ    | General Headquarters  |
| How    | howitzer  |
| ID     | infantry division   |
| IG     | infantry gun  |
| Jäg    | <i>Jäger</i> , light infantry                                 |
| K      | <i>Korps</i> , corps  |
| KTB    | <i>Kriegstagebuch</i> , war diary                             |
| lg.    | <i>lang</i> , long  |
| Lt, le | light   |

KURSK 1943

|       |  |
|-------|--|
| MC    | motorcycle   |
| Mtn   | mountain   |
| Mtr   | mortar   |
| Nbw   | <i>Nebelwerfer</i> , smokeprojector (German codename for rocket artillery) |
| Pak   | <i>Panzerabwehrkanone</i> , anti-tank gun                                  |
| PD    | Panzer division  |
| Pz    | Panzer   |
| r.    | Russian  |
| RD    | rifle division   |
| Rdfr  | <i>Radfahrer</i> , cyclist   |
| Recce | reconnaissance   |
| RVGK  | <i>Reserv Verkhovnogo Glavnogo Komandovaniya</i> , High Command's Reserve  |
| s.    | <i>schwere</i> , heavy   |
| SP    | self-propelled   |
| SPW   | <i>Schützenpanzerwagen</i> , armoured personnel carrier                    |
| StuG  | <i>Sturmgeschütz</i> , assault gun   |
| SU    | self-propelled guns in the Red Army  |
| T/O&E | Table of Organization and Equipment  |

# 1

## Background

When the Wehrmacht launched operation Barbarossa on 22 June 1941, it met an adversary which in many respects was of similar size, at least in terms of manpower and artillery systems.<sup>1</sup> The large Soviet numerical superiority in tanks and aircraft was to a great extent negated by the Red Army's poor leadership, communication systems and doctrine. During the summer and autumn, the Wehrmacht managed to inflict losses on the Red Army almost as quickly as the Soviet Union could feed new units into the battle, but when the 'mud' period began in the autumn, the German forces could not impose as high an attrition rate on the enemy as they had previously. Worse was to come. As the Red Army went over to the offensive in December 1941, it was no longer the Germans deciding the loss rate to be suffered by the Soviet forces. The spring of 1942 provided further time for force build-up, and it was not the Germans who benefited most from it. As can be seen in Table 1.1, the Red Army had about a 2:1 numerical superiority on the main front at the end of June 1942. According to Soviet literature, the balance was much more even, but that results from an exaggeration of German strength.

Despite this, the Germans succeeded in taking the initiative and delivering a heavy blow to the Soviet forces in eastern Ukraine. The German forces between Kursk and Rostov inflicted 586,834 casualties on the enemy between 28 June and 24 July,<sup>2</sup> thus paving the way for the advances towards Stalingrad and the Caucasus. To lose about 600,000 men in a month on what amounted to less than a third of the front line between Leningrad and the Black Sea was hard even for the Red Army. However, the German offensive gradually ran out of steam, thus reducing the attrition rate. With the German offensive contained, the Red Army could itself grasp the initiative and inflict a telling defeat on the Axis powers. It was not only the forces in and around Stalingrad that were struck by the Soviet attack, for during the following winter the offensive was successively expanded to involve forces from Orel southwards. The situation

KURSK 1943

TABLE 1.1: COMPARATIVE STRENGTH, 1 JULY 1942

|                                     | <i>Manpower</i>        | <i>Tanks and<br/>Assault Guns</i> | <i>Guns and<br/>Mortars</i> | <i>Aircraft</i>     |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------|
| <i>Soviet strength</i> <sup>3</sup> |                        |                                   |                             |                     |
| Main front                          | 5,217,000              | 5,850                             | 55,700                      | 2,350               |
| Stavka reserve <sup>4</sup>         | 750,000                | 900                               | 9,500                       | 2,150               |
| Total                               | 5,967,000              | 6,750                             | 65,200                      | 4,500               |
| Finnish front                       | 298,000                | 150                               | 4,571                       | 240                 |
| Other fronts*                       | 1,800,000              | 1,900                             | 15,000                      | 2,000               |
| <i>Axis strength</i>                |                        |                                   |                             |                     |
| German forces                       |                        |                                   |                             |                     |
| On eastern front                    | 2,635,000 <sup>5</sup> | 2,535 <sup>6</sup>                | 23,000†                     | 2,750 <sup>7</sup>  |
| On Finnish front                    | 150,000 <sup>8</sup>   | ~25 <sup>9</sup>                  | 700†                        | 264 <sup>10</sup>   |
| <i>Ostgebiete</i> **                | 212,000 <sup>11</sup>  | —                                 | —                           | —                   |
| Other areas***                      | 951,000 <sup>12</sup>  | 3,100 <sup>13††</sup>             | ?                           | 2,192 <sup>14</sup> |
| German satellites****               | 648,000 <sup>15</sup>  | ?                                 | ?                           | ?                   |
| Finnish forces <sup>16</sup>        | 210,000                | <100                              | ?                           | ~250                |

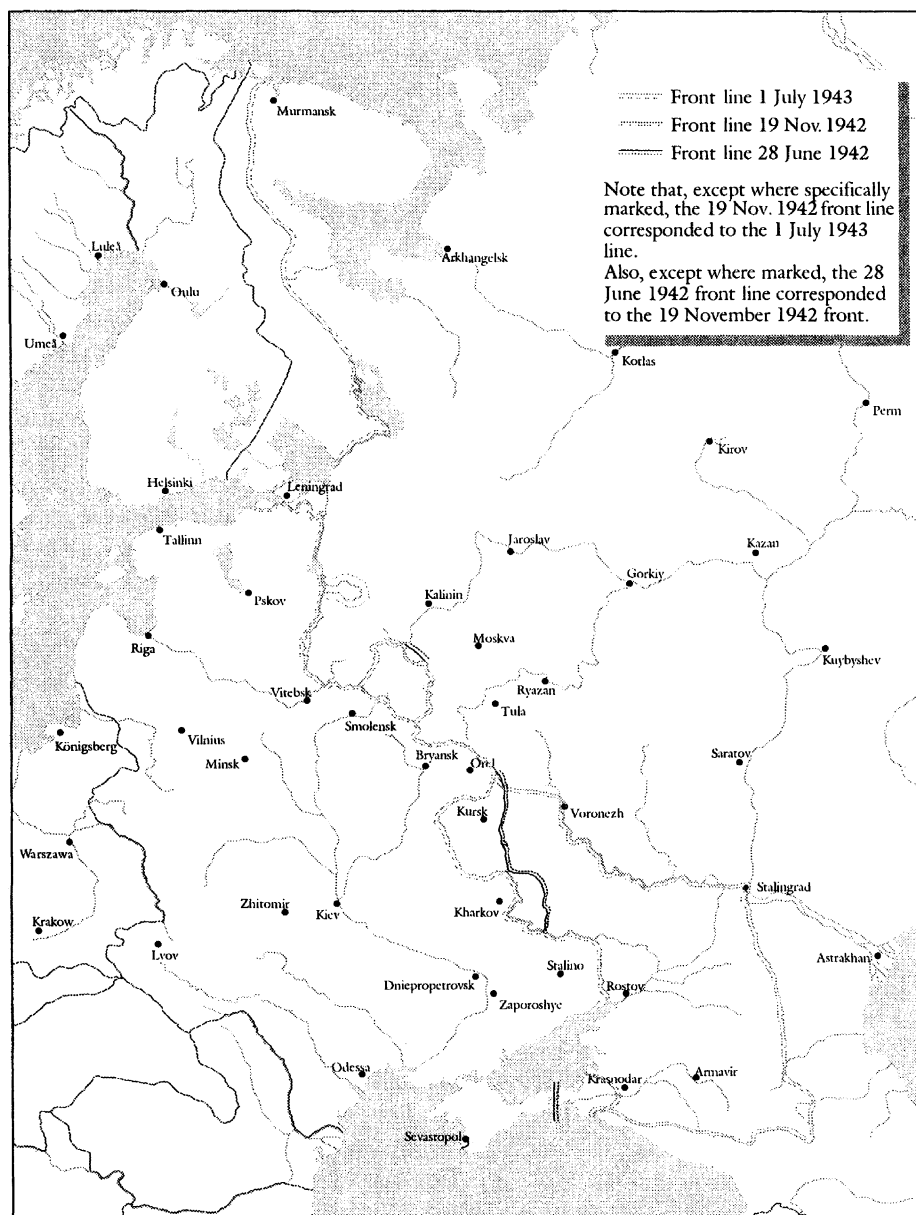
*Notes:*

- \* Other fronts include the Far East and the Soviet southern border. Figures are estimates only.
- \*\* Includes the rear occupied areas in eastern Europe.
- \*\*\* Includes forces in Norway, Netherlands, Belgium, France, Italy, Africa, Balkans and Germany.
- \*\*\*\* Includes Hungarian, Italian, Rumanian and Slovakian troops on the eastern front. Figures apply to 10 September 1942, additional satellite units had arrived since 1 July. The strength on that date must consequently have been lower.
- † Estimates based on T/O&E strength and number of units.
- †† Includes tanks accepted by the army but not yet supplied to units, tanks with training units as well as tanks with combat units, also included are 2,192 tanks considered unsuitable for front-line employment.

Guns and Mortars include AT guns, AA guns, mortars and indirectly firing artillery pieces.

became especially critical for the Axis forces, when the Hungarian 2nd Army and the Italian 8th Army were defeated and a large gap extended from Voronezh to the lower Don.

Soviet ambitions were, however, thwarted by the brilliant counter-stroke orchestrated by von Manstein, who succeeded in defeating the Red Army spearheads in the Ukraine and in stabilizing the front along much the same line as when the Germans launched their summer offensive of 1942. The outstanding difference lay in the two huge salients, which characterized the new front line. These were located around the towns of



Map 1. The eastern front, 1942–43

#### KURSK 1943

Orel and Kursk, two towns which, until World War II at least, were relatively unknown. Since the German-held Orel salient formed the northern shoulder of the Soviet-held Kursk salient, operations against either of the salients were likely to involve forces in the other. Both areas offered the prospects of cutting off considerable enemy forces if a successful attack could be launched. Thus it is no surprise that this area did attract the eyes of the men in Berlin and Moscow when they gathered around their maps.

The strategic situation in the spring of 1943 was in many respects different from the circumstances that had shaped the events during the summer campaign season of the previous year. The disaster at Stalingrad cast its shadow over the German high command, even though the German Army was actually stronger in 1943 than it had been in 1942. In terms of manpower, the German Army in the east had increased by nearly 20 per cent. The number of tanks and assault guns had risen from 2,535<sup>17</sup> to 3,524<sup>18</sup> in the same period. The quality of the tanks had also improved, as had the German AT guns. This was the encouraging side of the coin, but two more ominous facts also had to be considered. The first was the severe decline in the contribution made by Germany's allies since the summer of 1942. The Italian forces were gone altogether, while Rumania and Hungary fielded much smaller forces in the spring of 1943 compared with the contribution they had made during the summer of 1942. The second, and most serious change, lay in the increasing strength of the Red Army, although the German generals were perhaps only partly aware of this. The change lay not so much in manpower, but in the increase in tanks, artillery and aircraft (see Tables 1.1 and 1.2 for a direct comparison). Tanks not only increased in numbers, but the more powerful vehicles were receiving a greater share of production resources. In 1942, medium and heavy tanks made up 61 per cent of all those produced, while their quota was 86 per cent in 1943.<sup>19</sup> Artillery almost doubled in numbers, while the Soviets developed firing techniques suitable for their means of communication and fire direction. Thus, the summer of 1943 promised to be a much more challenging season for the Wehrmacht than the previous year had been.

Essentially, there were three choices for the German forces in Russia: (1) try a static defence; (2) use a mobile defence; or (3) try their fortunes with offensive action. Of these, the first was inevitably used over a large portion of the front. Most of the infantry units had only limited mobility and it had become more and more evident that the cost of attacks made by infantry without adequate tank support was not commensurate with the results, at least not in the longer term. A mobile defence was possible if the proportion of infantry units to mobile units was not too great.

BACKGROUND

TABLE 1.2: COMPARATIVE STRENGTH, 1 JULY 1943

|                                      | <i>Manpower</i>         | <i>Tanks and<br/>Assault Guns</i> | <i>Guns and<br/>Mortars</i> | <i>Aircraft</i>        |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| <i>Soviet strength</i> <sup>20</sup> |                         |                                   |                             |                        |
| Main front                           | 5,745,800               | 9,888                             | 91,791                      | 6,532                  |
| Stavka reserve                       | 1,111,000               | 2,688                             | 16,782                      | 662                    |
| Total                                | 6,856,800               | 12,576                            | 108,573                     | 7,194                  |
| Finnish front                        | 320,100                 | 311                               | 4,571                       | 299                    |
| Other fronts*                        | 1,955,000               | 3,200                             | 18,800                      | 4,500                  |
| <i>Axis strength</i>                 |                         |                                   |                             |                        |
| German forces                        |                         |                                   |                             |                        |
| On eastern front                     | 3,138,000 <sup>21</sup> | 3,524 <sup>22</sup>               | 25,000**                    | 3,180*** <sup>23</sup> |
| On Finnish front                     | 80,000 <sup>24</sup>    | ~25 <sup>25</sup>                 | 600**                       | 235*** <sup>26</sup>   |
| In other areas††                     | 1,237,000 <sup>27</sup> | 2,807 <sup>†28</sup>              | ?                           | 3,321*** <sup>29</sup> |
| Satellite forces****                 | ~225,000 <sup>30</sup>  |                                   |                             |                        |
| Finnish forces <sup>31</sup>         | 230,000                 | <100                              |                             | ~250                   |

*Notes:*

- \* Other fronts include the Far East and the Soviet southern border. Figures apply to 1 April 1943, not 1 July 1943.
- \*\* This is an estimate, based on T/O&E strength of the units on the eastern front.
- \*\*\* Figure applies to 31 May 1943. Includes all types of aircraft, including transport and liaison planes.
- \*\*\*\* Includes Hungarian, Rumanian and Slovakian troops on the eastern front.
- † Includes tank and assault gun units being set up, also includes vehicles no longer regarded as suitable for combat, but still retained by the Army.
- †† Of the manpower in other areas, 296,000 were in the Balkans, 195,000 were in Italy and 746,000 were in western Europe.<sup>32</sup>

Guns and Mortars include AT guns, AA guns, mortars and indirectly firing artillery pieces.

In the Army Group North area the number of infantry divisions was 38, while only one panzergrenadier division and not a single panzer division was subordinated to the army group.<sup>33</sup> In addition it had three Jäger divisions and one mountain division, which at least had somewhat better mobility than the infantry divisions. This was clearly not sufficient to mount a truly mobile defence at army-group level; neither did the terrain favour mobile operations. The final nail in the mobile defence coffin for Army Group North was Leningrad. It was unthinkable that Hitler would loosen the German grip on this city, even though it had been dented in January 1943, when the Red Army had opened a narrow land corridor to the besieged city.

In the Army Group Centre area, the prospects for a mobile defence

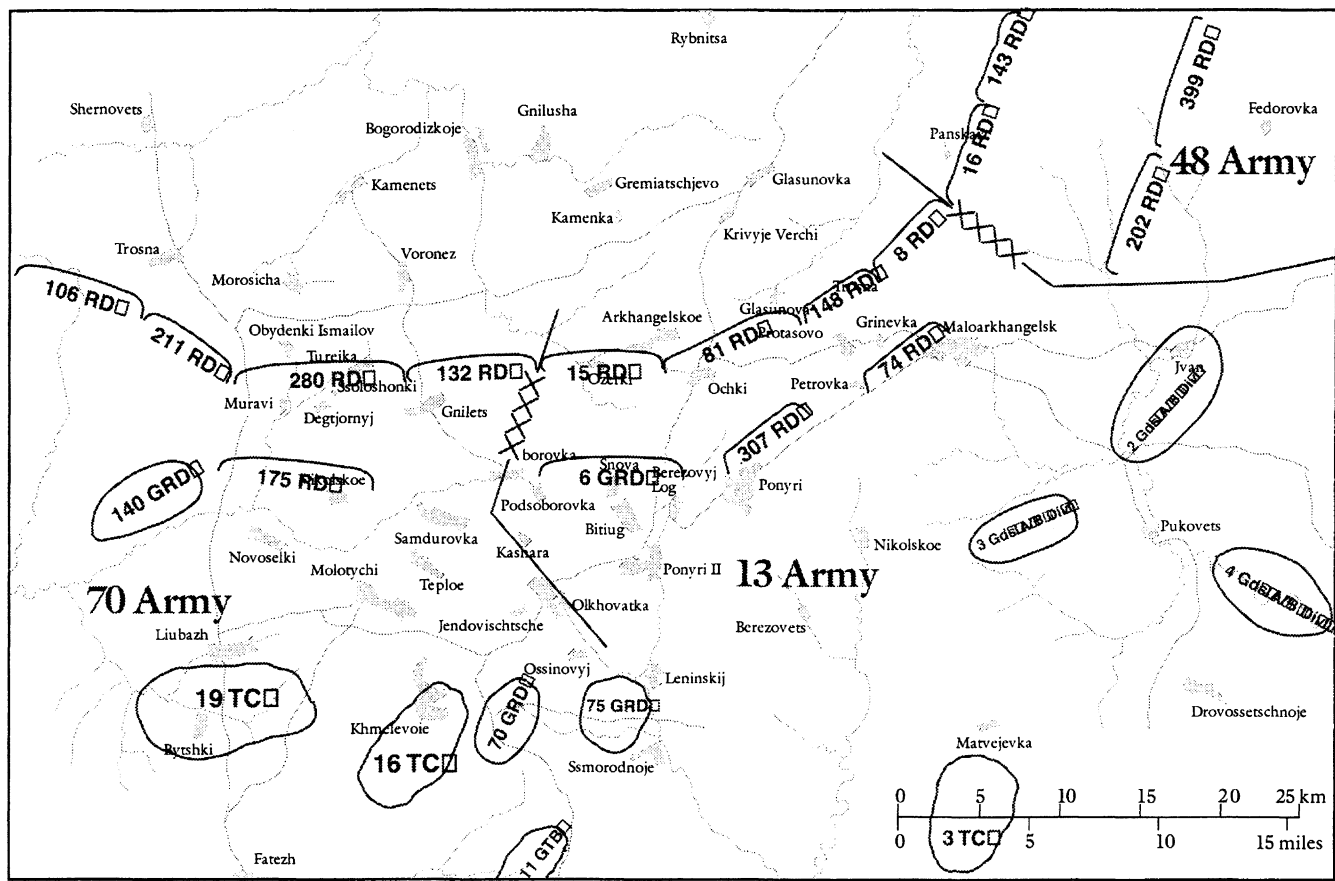
#### KURSK 1943

were better, since the terrain, while not ideal, was more suitable. No specific geographical features tied the ground forces to certain positions, and the proportion of mobile units was higher, 11 mobile divisions compared with 64 infantry divisions.<sup>34</sup> It is doubtful however, if it would have been possible to stage such a defence over more than limited sectors of the front, owing to the relatively limited number of mobile units.

In the Army Group South area the conditions for a successful mobile defence were more propitious than for any other army group. The number of mobile divisions was 13, while the infantry divisions amounted to 29 (including one mountain division).<sup>35</sup> While even this presented rather a low ratio, it was considerably higher than the average for the German armed forces as a whole. The Wehrmacht simply could not expect anything better. While this ratio certainly was not ideal, it at least made mobile defence a viable option, especially since the Red Army had an even lower proportion of mobile units in their forces. The geography was also favourable to this type of defence. No large area in Europe provided better terrain for a mobile defence than the Ukraine. But more ominous for this defence alternative was the fact that Kharkov, the fourth-largest city in the Soviet Union, was located only 35 kilometres from the front line along the Donets River. To compound matters for the German field commanders, the important industrial region around Stalino was equally perilously close to the front. For Hitler these were objectives that had to be denied to Stalin. This ruled out mobile defence in the Ukraine, at least until Soviet pressure had forced the Germans out of Kharkov and the Donets industrial region. However, by then it could be too late.

Whether a mobile defence would or would not have been successful is, of course, open to debate. Ever since the campaigns in 1941 had faltered, the fighting on the eastern front had increasingly turned into a grinding war of attrition. Historians tend to focus on the overwhelming Soviet manpower resources and their considerably greater production of weapons. To this has been added the fact that Germany had to devote resources to the Mediterranean and to the defence of western Europe, even though the eastern front clearly was the main concern. The implication of this was that the larger Soviet resources made a German victory in a war of attrition impossible.

In a war of attrition, however, it is not only the ability to feed new troops, tanks, guns and planes into the fighting that matters: the ability to inflict losses on the enemy is equally important. In this respect, the German Army had a substantial superiority. As it turned out, during 1943 Germany lost 1,803,755 men on the eastern front (killed, wounded and missing), of which 1,442,654 were combat losses.<sup>36</sup> This can be compared



Map 2. Central Front defensive dispositions

#### KURSK 1943

with Soviet casualties amounting to 7,857,503,<sup>37</sup> or more than four times higher, during 1943. In a war of attrition it is not possible to win if the loss ratio is too unfavourable, when the losses sustained exceed the rate of replacement. In this case the relative difference in losses was greater than the relative difference in population size.<sup>38</sup> According to this calculation it was the Red Army which could be expected to run out of men first, not the German Army. Two facts, though, altered the situation in favour of the Soviet Union. The first was the impossibility for Germany to send all its newly conscripted soldiers to Russia, since it also had to take into consideration strengthening the defence in the west. Second, the German population was older than the Soviet one, making a smaller proportion suitable for military service.

Similarly, German tank and assault gun losses (on all fronts) during 1943 amounted to 8,067,<sup>39</sup> while Soviet losses were approximately 23,500,<sup>40</sup> which can be compared with the German production of 10,747<sup>41</sup> and the Soviet production of 24,006 tanks and assault guns.<sup>42</sup> Again, the ratio between Soviet and German losses is greater than the ratio between Soviet and German production. In this respect, it must be remembered, the Red Army was aided by the fact that it received lend-lease tanks.

The implication of these figures is that the Soviet margin for victory in the war of attrition as events actually took place was slight and it cannot be regarded as having been inevitable. A German mobile defence could have been used to exact an even more favourable kill rate on the enemy, but whether this would have been sufficient to change the outcome of the war in the east is a subject of its own and outside of the scope of this book.

Since a mobile defence was not on the agenda, recourse had to be made to the other two possibilities. In this situation it was not surprising that the two salients around Orel and Kursk attracted the minds of the men in the German high command. If the Kursk salient could be pinched off, two positive results might be reaped. The Red Army would suffer serious losses and the Orel salient would become much less exposed. The opinions of the senior German commanders were divided concerning the feasibility, or even the advisability of such an offensive. Among the opponents was the recently appointed inspector-general of armoured troops, Heinz Guderian. He considered the whole idea pointless, since it was certain to result in heavy tank losses among the panzer divisions which were resting and refitting with new equipment during the spring. On the contrary, he thought it would be more appropriate to concentrate on strengthening the defences in the west.<sup>43</sup>

The idea of an offensive aimed at nipping off the Kursk salient seems to have appeared as early as March 1943. Indeed, it was a logical

## BACKGROUND

continuation of von Manstein's counteroffensive. He had assembled his striking force, largely built around the SS-Panzer corps, in the vicinity of Pavlograd and, as a first step, defeated the Soviet forces that had crossed the Donets river around Izyum. Having accomplished this, von Manstein directed his troops in a northerly direction. Kharkov was retaken and, in conjunction with the Großdeutschland division attacking from the west, the SS-Panzer corps continued, retaking Belgorod on 18 March.<sup>44</sup> It is doubtful whether the Germans had expected to get any further. The thaw was in full swing and gradually turning the country into a morass. This is also evident from Hitler's *Operationsbefehl Nr. 5*, which was issued on 13 March, five days before the fall of Belgorod.<sup>45</sup> In this directive, Army Group South was ordered to build up a strong panzer army north of Kharkov, in order to attack northwards in conjunction with forces from Army Group Centre. This latter army group was then to build its striking forces from the units released when the Rzhev salient had been evacuated, a move which was accomplished on 25 March. These forces were to be inserted in the Orel salient. The assembly of the attacking forces were to be completed in mid-April, which indicates that the Germans did not expect to take Kursk in March.

Events were not going to develop at that pace though. In his *Operationsbefehl Nr. 6* Hitler explained his decision to proceed with the attack, which had by now received the name 'Zitadelle', as soon as the weather permitted.<sup>46</sup> According to the directive, the attack *had* to be quickly and resoundingly successful and it *had* to give the German forces the initiative for the rest of the spring and the summer. From this directive, issued on 12 April, it was reasonable to expect the attack to start no later than the middle of May.

According to von Manstein, he envisioned the operation as a kind of pre-emptive attack. The idea, as he saw it, was to defeat the Soviet forces before they had completely refitted and replenished their units. Thereby he hoped to be able to destroy units completely, not even leaving cadres around which units might be reformed. If this were not achieved, he did not regard the attack to be a sensible operation.<sup>47</sup>

The attack was delayed, however. The principal reason for this was probably the desire to mount the attack with the greatest possible number of modern tanks. During spring 1943 the brand-new Panther tank had entered production. This tank outclassed all previous tanks in terms of fire power and frontal armour protection, as shown in the Tables in the Appendices. Also taking into account the fact that the Panther was the fastest German tank, with the best power-to-weight ratio and the fact that optics and communication equipment were excellent, the desire to use this

#### KURSK 1943

tank in the planned offensive is understandable. The main uncertainty with the new tank concerned teething troubles. General Guderian did not consider the Panther combat-worthy at its present stage. He expressed this view on 4 May at a conference in Munich where the chief of the General Staff of the Army Kurt Zeitzler, the chief of the General Staff of Luftwaffe Hans Jeschonnek, the commander of the 9th Army Walter Model, the commander of Army Group Centre Günther von Kluge, the commander of Army Group South Erich von Manstein and the minister of armaments Albert Speer had gathered with Hitler. Another discouraging fact was presented by Model. Recently taken aerial photographs showed that Soviet defensive positions of considerable strength and depth were being prepared. Model, concluding that the prospects of achieving surprise were gone, was negative to the Zitadelle plan. Guderian was more firmly than ever against the attack and was supported by Speer. Zeitzler and von Kluge were in favour of attack, while von Manstein thought that an attack in April might have stood a good chance of success but did not believe that the prospects for the attack were good at this late stage. The conference was dissolved without any decision being made.<sup>48</sup>

This was not the last time that the decision about whether the offensive should be launched or not was postponed; and with every postponement the possibilities for the Red Army to prepare their defences improved. Also, the photographs Model had received from the Luftwaffe reconnaissance units were telling the truth. The Stavka had realized, at least a month earlier, that the Kursk salient was likely to be the subject of a German attack. On 8 April, Zhukov had sent a report to Stalin in which he concluded that a German attack, with the aim of cutting off the Kursk salient, was going to be launched from the area around Belgorod in the south and from the Orel–Kromy area in the north. Concerning the possible alternatives for meeting this threat, Zhukov preferred the construction of strong defences in the threatened sectors, rather than launching a pre-emptive attack.<sup>49</sup> This proved to be the alternative the Red Army was going to settle for. However, they still had concerns about the ability of the troops to withstand a German summer offensive, therefore Steppe Military District (hereafter Steppe Front<sup>50</sup>) was formed and deployed behind the bulge. This was not the only reason, since it could also reinforce the front forces when the Red Army launched its counter-offensives. Table 1.3 gives the strength of the Red Army forces in the Kursk area on 10 April 1943.

As can be seen in Table 1.3, the Voronezh Front still lacked guns and mortars compared with the other two fronts. Probably, all losses from von Manstein's counterstroke had not yet been replaced. The Central Front