Prit Buttar
Author of Battleground Prussia

On A Knife's Edge

The Ukraine, November 1942 - March 1943
On A Knife’s Edge
DEDICATION
For Rob
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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

GERMANY

Oberstleutnant Wilhelm Adam – adjutant to Paulus
Major Franz Bäke – commander II Battalion, 11th Panzer Regiment
Generalmajor Hermann Balck – commander 11th Panzer Division
Field Marshal Fedor von Bock – commander Army Group South
Obergruppenführer Joseph Dietrich – commander LSSAH
Generalleutnant Karl Eibl – commander 385th Infantry Division, then XXIV Panzer Corps
Obergruppenführer Theodor Eicke – commander SS-Totenkopf
Generalleutnant Martin Fiebig – commander Fliegerkorps VIII
General Maximilian Fretter-Pico – commander of eponymous Armee Abteilung
Generalarmt Franz Halder – chief of the general staff
Leutnant Hans Hallfelz – reconnaissance platoon commander, 6th Panzer Division
Obergruppenführer Paul Hauser – commander II SS Panzer Corps
Generalmajor Otto Heidkämper – commander XXIV Panzer Corps
Generalleutnant Ferdinand Heim – commander XLVIII Panzer Corps
Generalarmt Gotthard Heinrici – commander XL Panzer Corps
General Karl-Adolf Hollidt – commander of eponymous Armee Abteilung
Generalarmt Hermann Hoth – commander Fourth Panzer Army
Oberst Walther von Hünersdorff – commander 11th Panzer Regiment
Generalleutnant Arno Jahr – commander 387th Infantry Division, then XXIV Panzer Corps

General der Sturmtruppen Hans Jeschonnek – chief of staff of the Luftwaffe
General Werner Kempf – commander of eponymous Armee Gruppe
Major Franz-Joachim Kinitz – chief of staff, 11th Panzer Division
Generalleutnant Friedrich Kirchner – commander LVII Panzer Corps
Dramatis Personae

Bodo Kleine – junior NCO in 377th Infantry Division
Field Marshal Ewald von Kleist – commander Army Group A
Field Marshal Gunther von Kluge – commander Army Group Centre
General Otto von Knobelsdorff – commander XLVIII Panzer Corps
Generalleutnant Hans Kreysing – commander 3rd Mountain Division
General Hubert Lanz – commander of eponymous corps
Generalmajor (Generalleutnant January 1943) Arno von Lenski – commander 24th Panzer Division
Oberst Richard Lepper – battlegroup commander in Sixth Army
Generalmajor Hans-Georg Leyser – commander 29th Motorised Infantry Division
Major Erich Löwe – commander I Battalion, 11th Panzer Regiment
Generalmajor Walther Lucht – commander 336th Infantry Division
General Eberhard von Mackensen – commander First Panzer Army
Field Marshal Erich von Manstein – commander Army Group Don, later Army Group South
Oberst Friedrich von Mellenthin – chief of staff, XLVIII Panzer Corps
General (Generaloberst November 1942, Field Marshal January 1943) Friedrich Paulus – commander Sixth Army
Obergruppenführer Joachim Peiper – commander of Kampfgruppe Lötlampe, LSSAH
Generalmajor Wolfgang Pickert – commander 9th Flak Division
Generalleutnant Georg Postel – commander 320th Infantry Division
Obergruppenführer Hermann Priess – commander SS-Totenkopf
Generalmajor Erhard Raus – commander 6th Panzer Division
Rittmeister Heinrich Remlinger – commander I Battalion, 4th Panzergrenadier Regiment
Generaloberst Wolfram Freiherr von Richthofen – commander Luftflotte IV
Oberst Eberhard Rodt – commander 22nd Panzer Division
Oberleutnant Hans-Ulrich Rudel – commander Sturzkampfgeschwader 2
Generaloberst Hans von Salmuth – commander Second Army
Oberleutnant Horst Scheibert – commander of 4th Panzer Company, 6th Panzer Division
Generalleutnant Arthur Schmidt – chief of staff, Sixth Army
General Walther von Seydlitz-Kurtzbach – commander LI Corps
Oberstleutnant (Oberst December 1942, Generalmajor February 1943) Rainer Stahel – commander of eponymous battlegroup
Oberstleutnant Hyazinth von Strachwitz – commander Grossdeutschland Panzer Regiment
Brigadeführer Herbert-Ernst Vahl – commander SS-Das Reich
Brigadeführer Kurt Wahl – commander SS-Das Reich
Generalleutnant Martin Wandel – commander XXIV Panzer Corps
Field Marshal Maximilian von Weichs – commander Army Group B
Oberst Walther Wenck – chief of staff 3rd Romanian Army, then chief of staff Armee Abteilung Hollidt
Generaloberst Kurt Zeitzler – chief of the general staff
Oberst Helmut Zollendorf – commander 114th Panzergrenadier Regiment

HUNGARY

Colonel-General Vitéz Jány – commander Second Army
Major General György Rakovsky – commander III Corps

ITALY

Lieutenant Eugenio Corti – artillery officer in Pasubio Division
General Italo Garibaldi – commander Eighth Army
General Giulio Martinat – chief of staff of Alpini Corps
Lieutenant General Gabriele Nasci – commander Alpini Corps
General Luigi Reverberi – commander Tridentina Division
Lieutenant Carlo Vicentini – infantry officer in Eighth Army

ROMANIA

General Petre Dumitrescu – commander Third Army
Lieutenant General Mihail Lascăr – commander 6th Infantry Division

soviet union

Mansoor Giztulovich Abdullin – soldier in the Red Army
Major General (Lieutenant General December 1942) Vasily Mikhailovich Badanov – commander XXIV Tank Corps
Major General Sergei Semenovich Biryusov – chief of staff Second Guards Army
Dramatis Personae

Major General Vasily Gerasimovich Burkov – commander X Tank Corps
Major General Vasily Vasileyevich Butkov – commander I Tank Corps
General Nikander Yevlampievich Chibissov – commander Thirty-Eighth Army
Lieutenant General Vasily Ivanovich Chuikov – commander Sixty-Second Army
Lieutenant-Colonel Georgi Nikolayevich Filippov – commander 19th Tank Brigade
Lieutenant General (Colonel General January 1943) Filipp Ivanovich Golikov – commander Voronezh Front
Lieutenant General Mikhail Ilyich Kazakov – commander Sixty-Ninth Army
Major General Fedor Mikhailovich Kharitonov – commander Sixth Army
Major General (Lieutenant General February 1943) Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev – member of the military councils of Stalingrad, Southeast, Southern and Voronezh Fronts
Isaak Kobylyanskiy – soldier in the Red Army
Major General Vasily Alexeyevich Koptsov – commander XV Tank Corps
Major General Petr Kirilovich Koshevoi – commander 24th Guards Rifle Division
General Vasily Ivanovich Kuznetsov – commander First Guards Army
Lieutenant General Dimitri Danilovich Lelyushenko – commander Third Guards Army
Major General Alexander Ilyich Lizyukov – commander Fifth Tank Army, killed near Voronezh 23 July 1942
Lieutenant General Rodion Yakovlevich Malinovsky – commander Second Guards Army
Lieutenant General Ivan Ivanovich Masleennikov – commander North Caucasus Front
Lieutenant General Kiril Semenovich Moskalenko – commander Fortieth Army
Ivan Stepanovich Nosov – artillerist in 107th Rifle Division
Major General Pavel Pavlovich Poluboyarov – commander XVII Tank Corps
Colonel Vasily Mikhailovich Polyakov – commander 25th Guards Tank Brigade
Lieutenant General Markian Mikhailovich Popov – commander Fifth Shock Army, then of eponymous mobile group
Major General Alexei Grigoreyevich Rodin – commander XXVI Tank Corps
Lieutenant General (Colonel General January 1943) Konstantin Konstantinovich Rokossovsky – commander Don Front
General Prokofy Logvinovich Romanenko – commander Fifth Tank Army
Major General (Lieutenant General December 1942) Pavel Alexeyevich Rotmistrov – commander VII Tank Corps, III Guards Tank Corps, and Fifth Guards Tank Army
Lieutenant General Pavel Semyenovich Rybalko – commander Third Tank Army
Major General Pavel Mendelevich Shafarenko – commander 25th Guards Rifle Division
Lieutenant General Sergei Matveevich Shtemenko – Deputy Head of Stavka Operations Directorate
Major Nikolai Grigorievich Shtykov – deputy regimental commander in 25th Guards Rifle Division
Major General Mikhail Stepanovich Shumilov – commander Sixty-Fourth Army
Major General Trofim Ivanovich Tanashchishin – commander XIII Mechanised Corps
Gabriel Temkin – Polish Jew, later a soldier in the Red Army
General Ivan Vladimirovich Tiulenev – commander Transcaucasian Front
General (Marshal February 1943) Alexander Mikhailovich Vasilevsky – chief of the general staff
Lieutenant General (Colonel General December 1942, General February 1943) Nikolai Fyodorovich Vatutin – commander Voronezh and Southwest Fronts
Lieutenant General Andrei Andreyevich Vlasov – commander Second Shock Army
Major General Vasily Timofeyevich Volsky – commander IV Mechanised Corps
Colonel General Andrei Ivanovich Yeremenko – commander Stalingrad and Southern Fronts
Colonel Gavril Stanislavovich Zdanovich – commander 203rd Rifle Division
Marshal Georgi Konstantinovich Zhukov – deputy commander-in-chief of the Red Army
Major General Mitrofan Ivanovich Zinkovich – commander XII Tank Corps
INTRODUCTION

A common viewpoint of the conflict on the Eastern Front in the Second World War is that the Germans fought with great tactical and operational virtuosity, but were ultimately defeated by sheer weight of numbers and the constant interference of Adolf Hitler in military affairs. Any skill on the part of the Red Army was restricted to dogged defence. Another belief, actively promoted by many German veterans, is that whilst Nazi authorities committed many atrocities in the occupied parts of the Soviet Union, the great bulk of the Wehrmacht – and many of the combat formations of the SS – took no part in such acts, and indeed were often completely ignorant of what was occurring. The truth, inevitably, is more complex.

The opening phase of what became known in Russian literature as the Great Patriotic War followed a series of dazzling triumphs in which the Wehrmacht swiftly crushed the Poles before overrunning the Low Countries and France and driving Britain from continental Europe. Even in these early campaigns, the apparent ease with which the German forces overwhelmed their opponents hid several fundamental truths. The striking power of the panzer divisions was beyond question, but their tanks were under-armed and poorly protected compared with those of Britain and France, and the great bulk of the German Army remained limited to the speed of horses and men on foot, little changed from previous centuries. The Luftwaffe had a comparatively easy time in its operations providing close support for the attacking forces, but once it stepped outside this purely tactical role, it struggled to assert itself – despite the boasts of Goering and the expectations of many within Germany, the British managed to extricate their forces from Dunkirk, and the RAF prevented the Luftwaffe from achieving air superiority over southeast England, without which any invasion of Britain was impossible.

The very speed with which Poland, Belgium, Holland and France were overrun also hid another fundamental weakness: in almost every respect, the German Army – indeed, Germany as a whole – was poorly prepared for prolonged
operations. It is a longstanding axiom of military planning that sufficient reserves should be kept in hand to deal with unexpected eventualities, but partly through necessity, the Wehrmacht entered each campaign with its resources heavily committed to the initial assault. Its ability to adapt to setbacks was therefore limited, but remained untested in the early campaigns.

Logistically, there were also weaknesses. With almost no oil resources within the Reich, Germany had to depend on oil obtained from countries like Romania and from its own synthetic oil production, and this latter category repeatedly fell far short of planned levels. This was of little consequence when Germany's enemies were dispatched in a short campaign; it was possible to build up sufficient stocks of fuel to sustain the armed forces for these brief but intense efforts. Maintaining longer-term operations at even a more modest tempo would rapidly place the limited fuel supplies of Germany under far greater strain.

Nor were industrial affairs any better. At a time when western air forces were routinely supplied with more than two aero engines per mounting, the Luftwaffe had barely 1.4 engines per mounting, and there were similar shortages of other essential spare parts. Partly as a consequence, the Luftwaffe started the campaign against the Soviet Union in 1941 with roughly the same number of operational aircraft as it had fielded in September 1939. Tank production too remained poor, and whilst this was of little consequence in the opening campaigns, which were punctuated by pauses in fighting that allowed depleted armoured units to be brought back to full strength, it would be far more important if fighting dragged on beyond just a few short weeks. The quantity of trucks and other vehicles being produced was also poor, resulting in growing reliance on vehicles captured in France and elsewhere, for which there was a very limited supply of spare parts. Despite receiving lavish quantities of money and material resources, German industry consistently performed far less efficiently than its equivalents in other countries. Again, this was of little consequence in the era of swift victories and conquests, but if Germany's opponents were able to continue the war, their better use of resources would begin to have an effect. During 1940, for example, German industry managed to produce about 10,000 aircraft; meanwhile, with rather less consumption of resources, the British produced 15,000. Production of munitions, weapons of all kinds, and motor vehicles consistently lagged far behind targets. Responsibility for German war industry rested with Hermann Goering, and its failures in the first half of the war are largely attributable to his inability to impose order upon it.

None of this mattered in the opening phases of the war, but by the end of 1942, as events on the Eastern Front took a dramatic turn against Germany, all
of these limitations would become far more important. To a large extent, every German campaign to this point had been a gamble. The Polish invasion was only possible due to the inactivity of the British and French, and the strike through the Ardennes, Belgium and northern France used the great bulk of Germany’s motorised forces – any setback here, or a determined attack into the Rhineland from French territory, would have been fatal. The invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 was the greatest gamble to date, with everything staked on achieving victory before the winter, and its failure led to an even greater gamble the following year – formations along the entire Eastern Front were stripped of resources to allow the German forces in the Ukraine to launch a further advance that, if successful, might isolate the Caucasus and deprive the Soviet Union of its access to fuel. The price of this gamble was to extend the front line hugely, and with most of the Wehrmacht’s striking power deployed at the points of advance, the long flanks represented a huge liability if the Red Army were able to take advantage of it.

The tactical and operational superiority of the German forces remained largely intact, but the Red Army was a quick learner. Like the Germans, the Russians had the opportunity of recent fighting, in particular the Winter War against Finland in 1939–40, to re-evaluate their peacetime plans and make alterations, but most of the lessons learned – often imperfectly – were still being implemented when Germany invaded Russia in 1941. Once war with Germany began, the learning process and implementation of change had to take place in ever more urgent circumstances. As the winter fighting in the eastern Ukraine unfolded in late 1942, the degree to which the Soviet forces had learned how to mount mobile operations, and the ability of the Germans to use their field expertise to make up for their material shortages, would be in close balance.

Inevitably, a work like this relies extensively on the memoirs of the individuals who played their parts in the great drama of the fighting of late 1942 and early 1943. The accuracy and reliability of these accounts is variable. Many of the German protagonists – Manstein, Balck, Mellenthin – have been regarded in recent years as writing misleading descriptions of the war and fostering the myth that the technically superior Wehrmacht, led with great skill by its officers, was eventually defeated by the lumbering colossus of the Red Army, which relied simply on sheer weight of numbers; these accounts also tend to give the impression that whilst parts of the SS and other German bodies may have carried out atrocities in the occupied territories, the soldiers and officers of the Wehrmacht were largely free of any blame. The accounts of the Soviet veterans are also of questionable reliability, having been written during the Soviet era and conforming
to the ideological requirements of their time. Yet even with these acknowledged weaknesses, these accounts remain a valuable source of information, not least in the light they shed on the personalities and attitudes of the men involved. Recent access to contemporary Soviet documentation has redressed the balance considerably, and this underlies the gradual reappraisal of the war on the Eastern Front, with growing awareness that as German power declined through a combination of inadequate industrial planning, the loss of irreplaceable personnel, and poor decisions made by Hitler, Soviet power grew as the commanders of the Red Army became increasingly skilled at the operational art. An important difference between German and Soviet development during the war is the manner in which the Soviet general staff rigorously analysed each campaign and tried to learn whatever lessons it could from its experiences; by contrast, Hitler retreated increasingly into a world in which his personal domination and the power of the ‘will to win’ were of greater importance than practical matters relating to battlefield experiences. During the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, several accounts of the war written by lower ranking Russian soldiers and officers emerged, and whilst these – like many of their German counterparts – are coloured by the rhetoric of the era, with all enemies routinely described as Nazis or fascists, they give a picture of the ordinary men (and in some cases, women) who fought against the Germans. These soldiers were products of nearly a quarter century of communist rule, and this inevitably shaped the way in which they viewed their enemies; but their unquestionable patriotism and comradeship are identical to those of combatants from any nation caught up in the war.

One feature of the fighting that took place in late 1942 and early 1943 is the almost implacable lack of mercy shown by both the Germans and the Russians. This was the first occasion that the Red Army liberated areas that had been under German control for more than a short time, and whilst Russian soldiers had been made aware of the mistreatment of Russian civilians by the Germans, this was their first opportunity to witness such mistreatment first-hand. The growing anger of ordinary soldiers is almost palpable in their accounts, and the desire for revenge, coupled with the sense that the Germans had to be driven from Soviet territory as fast as possible to prevent further atrocities, contributed to the growing Russian desire to continue their offensive operations as long as possible. German accounts repeatedly highlight the manner in which Russian units killed prisoners, but the same authors are silent about similar killings by Germans.

The manner in which the Germans approached the war also changed during this critical time. Until now, the war in the east had largely been one of conquest. By destroying the Soviet Union, Germany would satisfy its long-held
desire to obtain a land empire in the east, and realisation of this desire was – for many within the German hierarchy – inextricably bonded to brutal occupation policies. The resources of the conquered regions were to be exploited for maximum short-term gain without any regard for the impact upon the indigenous population, and this led to mass starvation in the Ukraine, a region that was still recovering from the excesses of Stalinist repression in earlier years; had the Germans behaved more like liberators and less like conquerors, the burgeoning partisan movement might have withered and faded away, and the outcome of the war might have been very different. Instead, forced requisitions that left the rural communities of the region without sufficient food for their own needs and the manner in which able-bodied men and women were rounded up for forced labour – many of whom were shipped off to Germany – resulted in the amount of land under cultivation falling disastrously. The mass killings of Jews, suspected communists, and other ‘undesirable’ elements of the population would reap a bitter harvest as the Red Army returned to the region. By the end of the winter of 1942–43, German rhetoric about the conflict was changing. The war against the Soviet Union was no longer exclusively the Rassenkrieg (‘racial war’) that Hitler had proclaimed in the summer of 1941. Instead, there was an increasing tendency – clearly expressed in the memoirs of many German soldiers and officers – that the war was being fought to save Europe from the threat of communism and the danger to western civilisation from the Asiatic hordes of Russia.

The scale of the German gamble in the 1942 campaign was so great that everything would depend upon fine margins. If the Red Army were able to take advantage of the overexposed German positions, there was a very real prospect of the war coming to a relatively swift conclusion with a crushing defeat from which the Wehrmacht would not be able to recover; conversely, if this was to be avoided, every ounce of German tactical and operational skill would have to be used to maximum effect.
Chapter 1

THE ROAD TO CRISIS

‘When Barbarossa begins,’ Hitler told his generals in early 1941, ‘the entire world will hold its breath.’ On 22 June 1941, 145 German divisions backed by the great bulk of the resources of the Luftwaffe, together with substantial forces from Finland and Romania – totalling perhaps three million men – crossed the border into the Soviet Union. Moscow, the prime objective at the start of the Barbarossa campaign, was 600 miles away; the vast spaces of Belarus and European Russia, with poor roads and railways, and huge tracts of forest and swamp, defended by 191 Red Army divisions and 37 mechanised brigades, lay between the Wehrmacht and the Soviet capital.1

Full of confidence after their swift victories over Poland and France, the German forces trusted that this campaign would be similar, though on a far larger canvas – a rapid advance in which the panzer divisions would cut apart the Red Army, while the Luftwaffe controlled the skies. Despite the size of the Red Army, and despite the vastness of the landscape, a victorious conclusion would come swiftly – indeed, it would have to come swiftly, because despite Goering’s pronouncements and boasts as the man responsible for the production of military materiel, German industry was simply not organised to sustain a prolonged war effort. With the Soviet Union defeated, Germany would be unassailable and the future of the Thousand Year Reich would be secured.

The fighting that followed showed both the Wehrmacht and the Red Army at their best and their worst. Whilst much has been made of the all-arms striking power of panzer divisions, their successes to date were more than merely the result of concentrating armoured vehicles in a single mobile formation; the close cooperation between the ground forces and the Luftwaffe was also an important factor, as was the ability of German officers to delegate
decision-making to their subordinates, allowing them to improvise in the face of unexpected developments and thus maintain a pace of operations that left their opponents bewildered and off-balance.

The customary view of the Red Army is that it relied greatly on the traditional solidity of Russian troops in defensive fighting and sheer numbers, and the Germans were further emboldened by the manner in which the Kaiser’s armies had consistently outfought the Russians in the First World War. But like every other army of the era, the Red Army contained its share of visionary commanders who had written extensively about warfare in the mechanised era. Indeed, Russian military thinkers produced far more written material about the possibilities of fighting in the mechanised age than the experts of any other country apart from Germany. Many of these visionaries held posts in the Soviet staff college where they passed on their ideas and more importantly their way of thinking to their students. Like their counterparts elsewhere, they articulated a multitude of ideas of variable accuracy, but the purges that ravaged the ranks of the army during the 1930s did huge damage to the manner in which new ideas were developed, tested and adopted. Mikhail Nikolayevich Tukhachevsky, perhaps the foremost thinker in the army, was arrested in 1937 and tortured until he confessed to being part of a conspiracy to overthrow Stalin, though there is little evidence to support this; he was found guilty in a trial in which he was denied legal representation and executed the same day. Five of the judges who sat in the trial were in turn arrested and executed in the ongoing purges, which also accounted for Ieronim Petrovich Ubolevich, another of those who contributed to the many articles proposing new ways of waging war.

Despite the fall of Tukhachevsky and others, their ideas of conducting all-arms operations in depth remained part of Russian military doctrine and were put to good use by Georgi Zhukov in a mechanised counteroffensive against Japanese forces in border fighting at Khalkhin Gol in 1939. However, it is vital to reassess all military thinking to see how accurate it is in the light of events, and the constant interference of communist doctrine prevented the Red Army from maximising its experiences against Japan, as well as learning the lessons of the Spanish Civil War. When the Red Army was unleashed against the comparatively weak forces of Finland in 1939–40, the rigid adherence to doctrine in the face of a tough, determined enemy resulted in severe casualties for little gain. Changes were implemented, as Sergei Matveevich Shtemenko, who would serve in the operations branch of the Soviet general staff during the war and was a student at the army’s staff academy in 1939 and 1940, later wrote:
The conclusions drawn by the Soviet high command from the recent war were making a noticeable impression upon the Academy … The study programme was shorn of obsolete elements. Particular stress was laid on field training and on working out complex forms of operation and combat. Training methods were being reformed to make us into commanders who could cope with any emergency.3

In this respect, the Russians were moving towards the German way of thinking: subordinate commanders needed the skills and knowledge to improvise in the face of unexpected events. In modern warfare, there simply wouldn’t be time to wait for detailed instructions from above. However, even if training establishments could make changes in the manner in which soldiers and officers were prepared for war, it would take time for such changes to filter down through the system, and there was also a pressing need for major organisational restructuring. By 1941, Soviet formations were all too frequently the wrong size – either too big and unwieldy, or too small and weak, unable to fight alone. By contrast, the German formations, particularly the panzer divisions, appeared perfectly balanced.

In terms of equipment, the inventories of the two sides had both good and bad points. In combat against the RAF, German bombers – particularly the Stuka dive-bombers – had proved to be vulnerable, but against the Soviet air force the Luftwaffe rapidly established air superiority and its bombers were able to operate with comparative ease. On the ground, German tanks remained a source of concern – under-gunned and under-armoured – but the use of supporting anti-tank guns, excellent levels of training in close cooperation, and good communications at every level allowed them to prevail in most battles, not least because so many Soviet tanks did not have radios. Consequently, Russian troops found that changing a tactical plan once battle was joined was almost impossible, and the official means of doing so – by waving flags from turret hatches – proved to be useless. In the years leading up to the war, the Red Army acquired huge numbers of new tanks – the T-26, adopted from the British Vickers 6-ton tank and produced in larger numbers than any other tank in the world at the time; the T-28; and the T-35 – but the entire tank fleet was plagued by shortages of spare parts and skilled technicians, meaning that a large proportion of tanks was unavailable at any given time. Some, like the T-35, proved to be so unreliable that ultimately nearly all were lost due to breakdowns rather than enemy action. Others, like the T-26, were soon found to be far too lightly armoured to be of much use in combat against armoured enemies. The newest Soviet tank, the T-34, proved to be far superior to anything deployed by the Germans or indeed
any other nation to date, but at the start of hostilities there were too few to have more than a local effect. The heavy KV-1 and KV-2 tanks were invulnerable to all but the best German anti-tank guns, but they too had few radios, were prone to breakdowns, and were difficult to operate. For example, changing gear often required the driver to resort to striking the gear lever with a hammer. In every other respect the performance of the army proved to be a shattering disappointment, with communications rapidly breaking down and officers struggling in vain to control unwieldy formations.

The armies of the Soviet Union floundered in the wake of their more nimble opponents, and a series of great encirclements seemed the forerunners of the rapid success on which the Germans depended. In 1939, the Soviet Union had occupied the eastern parts of Poland and had then forced the Baltic States to accept Soviet troops on their soil, prior to annexing them in 1940. This meant that the frontier was several hundred miles further west than might otherwise have been the case, but it proved to be a mixed blessing. On the one hand, there was more scope for conceding space to buy time; but on the other hand, there had been only modest progress in fortifying the new frontier. Hamstrung by Stalin’s refusal to allow a full-scale mobilisation in early June, when many within the Soviet military establishment realised that a German attack was imminent, the frontier armies fought and died as they struggled to come to terms with the onset of hostilities. Their officers lacked the training to show initiative and fight their way to freedom, and their soldiers fought bravely, but then laid down their arms when the hopelessness of their situation became clear. Most would die in German captivity.

But even in the midst of disaster, the soldiers of the Red Army were learning. At a tactical level, their use of armour became increasingly skilful as the fighting progressed, to the chagrin of the Germans. Stalin ruthlessly dismissed commanders that he felt had failed to live up to expectations, though their fates varied – some were disgraced or even executed, but others, particularly those with whom Stalin had close personal ties going back to the days of the Russian Civil War, were simply reassigned to new, non-combat roles. At an operational level, the failures of the opening weeks led to rapid reappraisal of doctrine. The structure of command was repeatedly reorganised to try to improve command and control, and despite the huge setbacks there was little sense of defeatism amongst the officers and senior commanders. If the Germans could be stopped, if the Red Army could catch its breath, it would be an increasingly formidable foe.

Ultimately, the German gamble of 1941 depended upon covering a huge amount of territory before the onset of winter. The start of the campaign was
delayed by poor weather and the need to secure control of Yugoslavia and Greece; despite this, the Wehrmacht seemed to be on the verge of reaching Moscow before Zhukov’s counterattack threw it back. Much has been written about whether the Germans could have defeated the Soviet Union before the end of 1941, but it seems likely that, even if the final assaults had reached or even encircled the Soviet capital, the losses suffered by the army were such that there simply wasn’t enough strength left to subdue the city and retain it. In particular, the infantry divisions were barely at half their establishment strength, and the panzer divisions had proved during the fighting for Warsaw in 1939 that without substantial infantry support, they were unable to fight effectively in built-up areas. In any event, the Siberian divisions that Zhukov had kept in reserve were unleashed in a series of counterattacks that made the magnitude of the German gamble plain: with all its waning strength in the front line of the drive on Moscow, the Wehrmacht had almost no reserves with which to beat off the counterattacks.

With its energy spent and its forces strewn across the snows of Russia, the Wehrmacht came dangerously close to destruction in the fighting that followed. Many felt that a substantial retreat would be needed, and at first Hitler agreed to withdrawals to better defensive positions. Within days though, the Führer intervened and ordered the troops to defend where they were. Many, such as Guderian and Hoepner (the commanders of the two panzer groups that had spearheaded the assault on Moscow) protested and were sacked. Through a mixture of a major effort by the Luftwaffe, local withdrawals – many unauthorised – and growing Russian exhaustion, the Germans were able to stabilise the front line.

The failure of the Wehrmacht to capture Moscow and the fighting that raged to the west of the city had major consequences for the future of the war. Hitler dismissed Walther von Brauchitsch, the commander-in-chief of the Wehrmacht, and assumed the post himself. Angered by the constant criticism and objections of officers like Guderian, he also moved to ensure that the more outspoken German generals were removed from their posts. In future, the German Army would receive its orders from an amateur, without even the support of constructive criticism from senior officers.

With the front line still so close to Moscow, Stalin remained concerned that the Germans would make a renewed attempt to take the city in 1942 and retained major reserves in the area, leading to weaknesses in the front line elsewhere. The German assault on Moscow had come in two phases, with a pause while the Germans waited for the ground to freeze and for supplies to be brought forward,
and Stalin had insisted on a counterattack during this pause, despite the protests of Zhukov, who felt that the assembled forces were inadequate for the task and that there were insufficient reserves available. This was followed by a much larger counterattack after the failure of the second German attempt to reach the city, and when this eventually drove the Germans back from the outskirts of Moscow, it was the turn of the Russians to learn a fundamental truth about armoured warfare: whilst tank forces could break through front lines with varying degrees of ease, exploiting those successes and destroying the isolated German pockets was a different matter. A great deal of energy was expended effectively pushing into open space – there were no clear objectives within striking range, no geographical features against which the Germans could be squeezed or whose capture would render the German positions untenable. Writing several years later, Alexander Mikhailovich Vasilevsky, who was acting chief of staff at Stavka – the Soviet high command – at the time, reflected:

A number of big shortcomings in troop control and military action came to the fore during the counteroffensive around Moscow … True, a deep carpet of snow hampered the advance, but the main factor was the lack of tanks, aircraft and ammunition where they were most needed. Formations, units and elements assumed a two-line battle order and attacked after a brief, insufficiently strong artillery bombardment; the artillery cover of the attacking infantry and tanks deep in the enemy defences was not efficient enough and sometimes was not employed at all. The tank units were usually employed as direct support for the infantry and rarely received independent missions. Gradually, however, the Soviet troops gained experience and began to act more successfully.6

Vasilevsky was to play a leading role in the events described in this book, and it is worth looking at his past in more detail. He was the fourth of ultimately eight siblings born to an impoverished priest in the town of Vichuga to the northeast of Moscow:

[My father’s] miserly earnings were insufficient even for the bare essentials for his large family. All of us, from the smallest to the biggest, worked most days in the fields. In winter father would do extra work as a carpenter, being commissioned to supply school desks, tables, window frames, doors and beehives.7

In 1909, aged 14, Vasilevsky went to the theological seminary in Kostroma, at great financial cost to his father. He was about to start his final year when war
broke out and he immediately volunteered for service; in January 1915, he and several schoolmates were drafted into the town garrison and then sent to the military academy in Moscow to train as junior officers. Here he studied the writers who had developed Russian military doctrine in the preceding years, such as Suvorov, Dragomirov and Skobelev. Many of these have been heavily criticised for failing to recognise the growing power of firearms and artillery and lauding the value of close-quarter fighting with the bayonet over fire and manoeuvre, but for a young man from the provinces with no military education, the books were nonetheless greatly inspiring and he proved adept at using the texts with judicious selectivity:

There were certain axioms in those works which I learned by heart: ‘Don’t describe, but demonstrate and back it up with description’; ‘First convey a single idea, have it repeated and assist in its assimilation, then convey the next one’; ‘Initially teach only the bare essentials’; ‘Entrust rather than order’; ‘Our task is to destroy the enemy – to fight to destroy without losing lives is impossible, to fight to lose lives without destroying is stupid.’

By the end of the year, Vasilevsky was in the ranks of the Russian Ninth Army at the southern end of the long Eastern Front. He experienced the realities of trench warfare and would have been involved in the murderously wasteful attacks made by the Russian Army using outdated tactics in late 1915 and early 1916, but he makes no mention of them in his memoirs. Instead, he concentrates on the Brusilov Offensive of the summer of 1916, when – using innovative tactics, many of which would play a part in tactical and operational developments in the years that followed – the Russian Army broke through the lines of the Austro-Hungarian troops in the southern half of the front and briefly threatened to achieve a potentially decisive victory. At the end of the year, following Romania’s entry in the war on the side of the Entente Powers, Vasilevsky accompanied Ninth Army when it was deployed in support of Russia’s new ally.

When the Russian Revolution broke out the following year, army units that were closest to Petrograd, the cradle of the revolution, were more likely to be seized by the revolutionary spirit than those further away. At the southern end of the front, Ninth Army was relatively untouched by the destabilising unrest that swept the Russian Army as the year progressed. For Vasilevsky, any lingering loyalty to the old order was swept away by the events of the Kornilov Affair, a series of confused events that led to the recently appointed supreme commander of the army, Lavr Georgievich Kornilov, making a failed attempt to seize power.
The Road to Crisis

After the October Revolution Vasilevsky spent more of his time with the revolutionary committees that were forming throughout the army, behaviour that was by no means universal amongst the officers in his regiment:

The soldiers excitedly debated the Decrees on Peace and Land, threw away their rifles, fraternised with the Austrian soldiers, openly expressed their discontent with the commanders and welcomed the new power expressing the people’s interests.

The most hated officers were sometimes threatened with lynching. The split in the officers’ ranks grew even wider. It was not so long ago that we had all sat round the same table, but now former comrades-in-arms looked daggers at each other. I too caught the resentful looks because I had recognised the Soviet power, was ‘hobnobbing with the Bolsheviks’ and visited the Soviet of Soldiers’ Deputies.11

Like many soldiers and officers, Vasilevsky decided that he had had enough of the war and went home in November 1917, officially on leave but with no intention of returning. Within weeks, he received a letter advising him that the soldiers of his old regiment had elected him to be their commander, but given the widespread unrest across Russia and Ukraine he chose to join the local military department, where he served as an instructor for the Vsevobuch (the system of universal basic military training introduced by the Bolsheviks to arm the people against the residual elements of the old order). His preference was to serve with the Red Army, but as he noted, there appeared to be reluctance to allow a former officer of the Tsar’s army to take up such a post. In late 1918 he accepted a job as a teacher, and the following April he finally joined the ranks of the Red Army; after the mishaps suffered by the new revolutionary army in its first engagements, there was a growing realisation that no amount of ideological purity could compensate for hard military knowledge and experience. He served in the Russian Civil War, helping to defend Moscow against the advance of General Anton Ivanovich Denikin, and in the fighting against Poland, where his division had to defend against the pursuing Polish troops after the Battle of Warsaw in 1920. Written during the Soviet era, his memoirs attempt to portray events from that era in as favourable a light for the Bolsheviks as possible, but there could be no doubt that the Red Army had suffered a major setback, as had the Russian communists’ dream of exporting their revolution to the other nations of Europe.

In the years that followed, Vasilevsky held a series of commands in which he demonstrated the manner in which his experiences as an officer and a teacher combined well. He encountered several senior figures in the Soviet regime,
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including Kliment Yefremovich Voroshilov and Boris Mikhailovich Shapovnikov – he had a particularly close friendship with the latter, which was of great advantage to him in the years that followed. It was almost inevitable that he would be posted to the Directorate of Military Training, where he met Tukhashevsky and Zhukov, and in 1937, at a time when Stalin’s purges were tearing great holes in the Red Army, he was appointed to the general staff. Vasilevsky’s survival in these years was due partly to the influence of good friends like Shapovnikov, and partly to his inborn sense of diplomacy and tact. Stalin had a good personal relationship with him. When he learned that Vasilevsky had broken off contact with his father on the grounds that, as a priest, he was not a communist and was seen as an enemy of the people, he urged Vasilevsky to get in touch with his family again. There were mixed views about the diplomatic, non-confrontational style that Vasilevsky adopted – some, like Shtemenko, who in many respects followed in Vasilevsky’s footsteps through the Soviet general staff, described him as a brilliant yet modest officer with a huge capacity for work, and worked alongside him for many years:

This close and rather long period of collaboration allowed me to make a very thorough study of Vasilevsky’s personal qualities. And the more I got to know him, the more deeply I came to respect this man of soldierly sincerity, unfailingly modest and cordial, a military leader in the finest sense of the term.

… What always distinguished Vasilevsky was the confidence he placed in his subordinates, his profound respect for his fellow men and concern for their human dignity. He understood perfectly how difficult it was to remain well organised and efficient in the critical early period of this war which had begun so unfavourably for us, and he tried to bring us together as a team, to create a working atmosphere in which one would not feel any pressure of authority but only the strong shoulder of a senior and more experienced comrade on which, if need be, one could lean … Among the members of the general staff Vasilevsky enjoyed not only the highest esteem but also their universal love and affection.

… Nature had endowed Vasilevsky with the rare gift of being able to grasp essentials literally in his stride, drawing the right conclusions and foreseeing the further development of events with a special clarity. He never made any display of this, however. On the contrary, he would always listen to the ideas and opinions of others with deliberate attention. He would never interrupt, even if he did not agree with the views expressed. Instead, he would argue patiently and persuasively and, in the end, usually win over his opponent. At the same time he knew how to defend his own point of view in front of the Supreme Commander [Stalin]. He did this tactfully but with sufficient firmness.
Some have speculated whether he was promoted precisely because he was so compliant to Stalin’s wishes, bordering in some cases on timid. Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev regarded him as being completely under the sway of the Soviet dictator, but as shall be seen, there were reasons for animosity between Vasilevsky and Khrushchev. It is noteworthy that there is nothing remotely vainglorious in Vasilevsky’s memoirs and he repeatedly goes out of his way to give credit to others. Rather than being Stalin’s yes-man, it is more likely that the Soviet dictator recognised that he was a man without personal political ambition and who was therefore not likely to be a threat; consequently, he was happy to tolerate a diligent, intelligent man who knew how to disagree without causing animosity.

Immediately before the start of the Second World War, Vasilevsky became deputy commander of the general staff’s Operations Directorate; he was personally involved in negotiating the ceasefire line with Finland at the end of the Winter War. He became chief of the Operations Directorate in August 1941 and deputy chief of staff, taking command when Shapovnikov was forced to step aside due to illness during the following winter. It was in this role that he became intimately involved in the fighting around Moscow – whilst the operations may have been under the control of Zhukov, Vasilevsky worked tirelessly on the logistic support needed first to stop the Germans, then throw them back. He showed himself to be a model staff officer, a man who could diligently put into practice the plans of others, modifying them as circumstances dictated without deviating from their intention.

Despite the limited successes of the winter fighting, Stalin insisted that the tide had turned and that the strength of the Wehrmacht was broken. In early January, he wrote to all higher commands:

After the Red Army had succeeded in wearing down the German fascist troops sufficiently, it went over to the counteroffensive and pursued the German invaders to the west. So as to hold up our advance, the Germans went on the defensive and began to build defence lines with trenches, entanglements and field fortifications. The Germans intend thereby to delay our advance until the spring so that then, having assembled their forces, they can once again take the offensive against the Red Army. The Germans want, consequently, to play for time and take a breather.

Our task is not to give the Germans a breathing space, to drive them westwards without a halt, force them to exhaust their reserves before springtime when we shall have fresh big reserves, while the Germans will have no more reserves; this will ensure the complete defeat of the Nazi forces in 1942. But to implement this
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task we must see that our troops have learned how to breach the foe’s line of defense, learned how to organise a breach in the enemy defences in all its depth and thus pave the way for our infantry, our tanks and our cavalry to move forward. The Germans have more than one line of defence; they are building and will soon have a second and a third line. If our troops do not learn quickly and thoroughly to break down and break through the enemy’s line of defence, our drive forward will not be possible.15

There were therefore to be further counterattacks across the entire front. Again, Zhukov objected in vain that the Red Army was not yet strong enough to mount such operations, and further assaults without clear operational or strategic objectives would dissipate strength without any commensurate gains.16 However, Stalin insisted on launching widespread attacks, believing that by doing so, he could keep the Germans off balance and prevent them from seizing the initiative and launching another major strike against Moscow, an abiding concern in his mind.17

The offensives that followed confirmed that Stalin’s views about the Wehrmacht were far too optimistic. The counterattacks outside Moscow had left the Germans in possession of a large salient around the town of Rzhev, and further attempts in early 1942 to reduce it led only to major casualties. An attempt to destroy a large German pocket at Demyansk, south of Leningrad, was coordinated personally by Vasilevsky and proved both costly and futile, but the ability of the Luftwaffe – at the cost of hundreds of hard-to-replace transport aircraft and aircrew – to sustain the pocket for several months was something that would have consequences in the months that followed. Not far away, General Andrei Andreyevich Vlasov’s Second Shock Army led a major effort to break the siege of Leningrad; when neighbouring armies failed to advance as far as Vlasov’s troops, Second Shock Army found itself surrounded and was forced to surrender.

In the south, General Semyon Konstantinovich Timoshenko – another old Civil War comrade of Stalin – led a strong attack that threatened to reach Kharkov, but unknown to Stavka the Germans had selected the Ukraine as their prime focus for 1942, and lethal counterattacks led to a rapid reversal of fortunes and further catastrophic casualties. Zhukov and Vasilevsky both repeatedly asked Stalin to call off the offensive and withdraw the forces that had been committed, but Stalin refused until it was too late, with the result that Soviet losses climbed to 300,000, including 171,000 men taken prisoner. Critically, the Red Army lost over 1,200 precious tanks, leaving it outnumbered in armour for the coming fighting. Khrushchev, who was working as Timoshenko’s political commissar, felt
that Vasilevsky should have tried harder to change Stalin's mind and blamed him personally for the losses that were suffered. This criticism is surely unreasonable – the blame lay in the over-optimistic assessment and planning of Timoshenko (and therefore Khrushchev) who placed their troops in peril in the first instance, and then in Stalin's refusal to follow the advice of Zhukov and Vasilevsky, though Stalin attempted to pass blame for the mishap to Timoshenko and Krushchev:

The [Soviet] general staff followed the development of the operation, which had been undertaken on the initiative of the command of the front, with great misgivings. Stavka warned the front that it could not provide any additional troops, ammunition or fuel for the operation … But the military council of Southwest Front guaranteed success even without these.

… The position became more and more difficult until it was extremely critical. To the military council's request for help [Stalin] was compelled to reply:

‘… Stavka has no new divisions ready for action … Our arms resources are limited and you must realise that there are other fronts besides your own … Battles must be won not with numbers but by skill. If you do not learn to direct your troops better, all the armaments the country can produce will not be enough for you.’18

Given the number of occasions that Stalin had urged the front commanders to continue the winter attacks, it seems somewhat harsh that Stalin was now placing all the blame for the failures of these attacks on local commands, but regardless of who was culpable, as spring turned to summer the Germans were once more advancing, driving the Red Army before them.

The new offensive was not, as Stalin had expected, directed against Moscow. Instead, Hitler directed his forces to reach the line of the lower Volga with the intention of cutting off the Caucasus and its oilfields from the rest of the Soviet Union. Once this had been achieved, the Wehrmacht was to overrun the Caucasus as swiftly as possible, not least because Hitler believed that access to the Caucasus oilfields was vital for Germany's war effort. Stalin should have been aware of what was coming – on 19 June, a German plane carrying Major Reichel, the operations officer of 23rd Panzer Division, was shot down, and comprehensive maps showing the proposed German plan of campaign were recovered from the wreckage by Soviet troops.19 When this intelligence windfall was presented to Stalin, he dismissed it as a German attempt at misinformation.20 Ironically, this was at least partly due to a genuine German misinformation campaign – following the successful conclusion of the fighting around Kharkov, OKH (OberKommando
des Heeres or ‘Army High Command’) issued instructions under the codename
Fall Kreml (‘Operation Kremlin’) for a resumption of the previous winter’s
offensive to take Moscow. Detailed maps of Moscow were distributed down to
regimental level in the German divisions facing the Soviet capital and instructions
were issued for planning meetings to take place during the summer. As this fit
neatly with Stalin’s expectations, it is unsurprising that, given the choice of
following his own belief or accepting the new intelligence recovered from the
wrecked plane in the Ukraine, he chose the former.\(^2\) The Reichel episode had
another consequence: Hitler issued instructions that in order to prevent a repeat
of such incidents, neighbouring units were not to have information about the
orders issued to each other. The result was increasing rigidity in the German
command structure, with a hugely detrimental effect on the skilful and adaptive
manner in which the Wehrmacht had functioned in previous campaigns.

The losses suffered by the Red Army in the disastrous fighting near Kharkov
in May left the Germans with a decided advantage. With barely any major effort,
the German First and Fourth Panzer Armies erupted through the Soviet defences
and headed east. The Red Army was in a period of transition; many of its pre-
war troops and officers had been killed or taken prisoner in 1941, and their
replacements were still learning their trade in the front line. Partly through force
of circumstance and partly to avoid pointless casualties, Soviet troops fell back
without risking the encirclements that had been the highlight of the previous
year’s campaign, as a sergeant in 3rd Panzer Division recorded:

[It’s] quite different from last year. It’s more like Poland. The Russians aren’t nearly
so thick on the ground. They fire their guns like madmen, but they don’t hurt us\(^2\)

Attempting to stop the torrent of German armour would have been as disastrous
a policy as it would have been futile, and Stavka issued instructions for the
German breakthrough to be limited by the Red Army securing both ‘shoulders’
of the offensive, at Voronezh in the north and Rostov in the south. The speed of
Fourth Panzer Army’s advance to the Don at Voronezh threatened to derail this
plan almost immediately and a new Voronezh Front was created by Stavka under
the command of Lieutenant General Nikolai Fyodorovich Vatutin. Resistance
stiffened just in time, and Field Marshal Fedor von Bock, commander of Army
Group South, drew up detailed plans to throw substantial forces at the city in
order to take it and secure the northern flank of the offensive.

Hitler had no intention of allowing the determined Russian resistance at
Voronezh to derail his sweeping advance to the Volga and the Caucasus. Army
Group South was divided into Army Group A, tasked with driving south to the Caucasus oilfields, and Army Group B, which was to secure the line of the lower Volga. Bock was given command of Army Group B, but then dismissed when Hitler grew impatient with the delays at Voronezh. His replacement was Generaloberst Maximilian von Weichs, an aristocrat from Bavaria who Hitler judged was perhaps more compliant than the Prussian Bock.

Between Voronezh and Rostov, the Red Army continued to fall back. The lack of resistance was unnerving to some Germans, as a journalist wrote in the *Völkischer Beobachter*:

The Russian, who up to this time has fought stubbornly over each kilometre, withdrew without firing a shot. Our advance was only delayed by destroyed bridges and by aircraft. When the Soviet rearguards were too hard-pressed they chose a position which enabled them to hold out until night … It was quite disquieting to plunge into this vast area without finding a trace of the enemy.23

Hitler interpreted this as a sign of terminal weakness, that the Red Army was running out of troops. In a conversation with Generaloberst Franz Halder, the chief of staff of OKH, he said on 20 July: “The Russian is finished. I’m convinced of it.”24

At the time, Halder was inclined to agree with the Führer, but a steady stream of intelligence convinced him that the Soviet Union still possessed substantial resources that made the conquest of the Caucasus a risky venture. Indeed, such an operation only made sense if Hitler was right and the Red Army was wrecked beyond recovery – otherwise, the long flank along the Don and Volga would be hugely vulnerable to a Soviet counterattack. Unlike the previous winter, when Zhukov’s counterattacks in front of Moscow ultimately ran out of steam before they could reach any meaningful objective, the Red Army would have several strategic targets within range. The most obvious option was to thrust down to the Sea of Azov and thus isolate any German forces that had penetrated into the Caucasus, but the rail crossings of the lower Dnepr were also conceivably within range, and if the Germans lost control of these, it would be impossible to supply the formations to the east of the river.

The increasingly alarming intelligence was largely correct – if anything, it underestimated the strength of the Red Army. During much of 1941, Soviet armaments production was badly disrupted as factories were hastily dismantled and shipped east, but even during this period the Soviet Union continued to produce more tanks than Germany. By early 1942, the factories had been
reconstructed safe from German interference, sometimes in relatively primitive conditions; workers in the cluster of tank factories around Chelyabinsk – which earned itself the nickname of ‘Tankograd’ in the Soviet press – often worked in unheated buildings, many without glazing in their windows or even intact roofs. By the summer, there were sufficient tanks to create first two, then four new tank armies, but it is important to understand the difference in size and capability of Soviet formations in comparison to German ones. In 1942, a tank army consisted of two tank corps and a rifle division; each tank corps had three tank brigades and a motorised infantry brigade, with a total armoured strength of 20 heavy KV-1 tanks, 40 T-34s, and 40 light tanks. Such a corps was in fighting strength the equivalent of a weak panzer division, so a tank army could be considered as roughly the equivalent of a reinforced panzer division or an understrength panzer corps. On 6 July 1942, as the German Fourth Panzer Army fought its way into the western parts of Voronezh, the new Fifth Tank Army, commanded by Major General Alexander Ilyich Lizyukov, launched a counterattack; partly as a result of inexperience and partly due to logistic difficulties, the attack was made piecemeal with a single tank corps on the first day and the rest of the tank army being thrown in over the subsequent two days. Even this might have succeeded if Lizyukov had been opposed by infantry, but it was his and his army’s misfortune that the German 24th Panzer Division, created in the winter from the personnel of the Wehrmacht’s only cavalry division, lay in their path and was able to smash each attack in turn. Within a week, Fifth Tank Army had lost over 8,000 men and 73 of its tanks.25 Lizyukov was demoted and assigned to command II Tank Corps; on 23 July, he was ordered to attack again but his brigades found themselves isolated and surrounded. Lizyukov commandeered one of the few heavyweight KV-1 tanks available and set off to try to reach his isolated units, but ran into tough German defences. Although the armour of the KV-1 proved impervious to most German anti-tank shells, the vehicle was immobilised and then overrun by infantry, and Lizyukov was killed.26

Despite these setbacks, the Soviet forces continued to learn. Colonel Pavel Alexeyevich Rotmistrov was at the time the chief of staff of a mechanised corps, and wrote a frank analysis of the failure of the tank corps:

The difficulty is that while there isn’t much difference in speed between the light (T-60) tank and the medium (T-34) tank on the roads, when moving across country the light tanks are quickly left behind. The heavy (KV) tank is already behind and often crushes bridges, which cuts off units behind it. Under battlefield conditions, this has meant that too often the T-34 alone arrived; the light tanks
had difficulty fighting the German tanks anyway, and the KVs were delayed in the rear. It was also difficult to command these companies because occasionally they were equipped with different types of radios or none at all.27

In response to this and other reports, Lieutenant General Iakov Nikolayevich Fedorenko, deputy defence minister and head of the tank and mechanised troops directorate, initiated a series of changes. Crew training was improved, particularly to promote cooperation between individual vehicles and small units. More radios were to be fitted to tanks, and handles welded to their hulls to allow infantry to ride on them as they went into battle. The KV-1s were withdrawn from tank brigades, which became made up of a mixture of T-34s and T-70s, and the overall strength of the brigade was increased to 60 tanks, so that a tank corps fielded 180 in all, making it a far better match for a German panzer division. The artillery component of the corps was also steadily enhanced, at least on paper, but it proved difficult in the short term to provide sufficient guns to satisfy the new establishment tables that were drawn up. Regardless of this, the main weakness remained in command and tactical skill. As a result, disasters like Lizyukov’s disjointed counterattack continued to fritter away the hard-gained resources of the Soviet forces.

During the chaotic retreats of 1941, many Red Army units had continued to fight until they were wiped out and their few survivors were then cobbled together hastily into new formations; now, with much of the Eastern Front far quieter, there was time to pull degraded units out of the front line and bring them back up to strength with fresh drafts and to replace their lost equipment. The replenished units were then redeployed in quiet sectors to allow their new recruits time to learn their craft; instead of being thrown into the fire of battle in formations made up entirely of inexperienced men, the new troops of the Red Army learned to fight side by side with the survivors of the previous year and had the opportunity to learn from their experiences. Relationships between officers of different ranks and the men they commanded became more established and mutual trust and confidence grew as a result. If they were used judiciously, if a good operational opportunity presented itself, the units of the Red Army would be a far more formidable proposition for the Wehrmacht.

First, though, the German thrust towards Stalingrad and the Caucasus had to be brought to a halt, and trying to achieve this continued to cost the Russians major losses. Whilst Vatutin’s Voronezh Front had succeeded in securing the northern ‘shoulder’ of the German advance, the intended bastion on the southern side – Rostov – fell to the advancing Germans on 23 July, the same day that
Lizyukov was killed. This was a major setback for the Red Army; having been caught off-guard by the German drive in the south, it was still scrambling to respond, and after capturing Rostov – and overrunning the Crimea – the Wehrmacht was in position to exploit its gains on a broad front. The local Red Army units were far too weak to cover the vast spaces that now formed the battlefield.

Nevertheless, an attempt had to be made to stop the Germans from reaching Stalingrad and the Volga. Two tank armies – First and Fourth – were available, but both were significantly below establishment strength and only First Tank Army was ready to attack. Its formations were thrown into the fighting as the Germans approached the Don crossings at Kalach; by mid-August, it had ceased to exist. Nevertheless, the German advance was slowed. Just as the Red Army was struggling to cover the terrain, so too the Germans were finding it much harder to concentrate forces, especially given the poor roads. The increasingly long northern flank of the advance along the Don had to be covered by the infantry divisions of the German Sixth Army, leaving it with reduced forces for dealing with the Russian defenders around Kalach. Gradually, the armies of Germany’s allies – the Hungarians, Italians and Romanians – replaced Sixth Army’s infantry formations along the Don, and these infantry divisions were sequentially added to the forces trying to reach Stalingrad; however, torn between the need to keep up attacks before the Russians could strengthen their lines and the need to pause to concentrate troops, General Friedrich Paulus, commander of Sixth Army, felt obliged to choose the former. As a result, the intermittent trickle of German divisions was more or less matched by the ability of the Red Army to send reinforcements to the area. Casualties rose steadily, and despite repeated requests from Paulus it proved impossible to secure adequate replacements. His infantry formations had started the campaign below full strength, and their steady losses through the summer left them increasingly weakened.

If the Red Army couldn’t stop the Wehrmacht, Hitler could. The failure to complete the capture of Voronezh left a strongpoint from which the Soviet forces could threaten the entire flank of the German advance, but the Führer’s impatience to pursue his greater goals in the south prevailed. Fourth Panzer Army was ordered south to help Kleist’s First Panzer Army force the crossings over the lower Don so that it could drive on towards the Caucasus. When it was given, the order might have made sense, as Kleist was encountering substantial resistance and there was a possibility that, by concentrating sufficient mobile forces in the area, the Germans could destroy the Russian units trying to defend the river line. But by the time Hoth arrived on the Don, the Soviet forces had
made good their escape. Resistance thereafter was almost non-existent, and once across the lower Don, Kleist’s units rolled south as fast as fuel supplies would allow. Meanwhile, having contributed nothing to Army Group A’s task – other than creating two major traffic jams, one as he passed behind Sixth Army and one on the approaches to the lower Don – Hoth was ordered to turn northeast and attack towards Stalingrad. The depleted divisions of the German Sixth Army were finding it hard to make progress as a steady flow of Russian reserve formations was deployed in their path. Had Fourth Panzer Army been available to lead the way to Stalingrad from the northwest, as had originally been intended before it was diverted first to the south and then ordered to attack Stalingrad from the southwest, it is likely that Sixth Army would have been in possession of the city and the west bank of the lower Volga before the Red Army could shore up its defences. Instead, it found itself drawn into an increasingly bitter battle of attrition in the ruins of Stalingrad. The losses suffered by its infantry divisions were now causing serious concern, and these casualties were augmented by another factor – Oberst Wilhelm Adam, Paulus’ adjutant, noted with increasing concern that illness was as great a drain on the strength of German divisions as enemy action. Regardless of the opinions of Hitler about the weakness of the Red Army, field commanders grew steadily more uneasy. Compared with the previous year, few prisoners were being taken. Hitler continued to interpret this as a sign that the Red Army was running out of men; the soldiers in the front line, however, increasingly feared that the Russians were preserving their strength for the coming battles.

It was a year of huge swings of the pendulum. At the beginning of 1942, the Wehrmacht was reeling from its failure to take Moscow and the subsequent Soviet counterattacks. In the weeks that followed, Stalin’s over-eagerness to launch offensive operations handed back the initiative to the Germans, who first crushed the Red Army drive towards Kharkov and then opened up their own major offensive. As autumn began, the pendulum was swinging back. Sixth Army and large parts of Fourth Panzer Army were stuck in bloody street-fighting in Stalingrad, while Kleist’s First Panzer Army ran out of steam – and supplies – in the Caucasus foothills. Increasingly, the Germans found that they lacked the logistic capability to support both the advance into the Caucasus and the huge demands of Sixth Army in Stalingrad. The simultaneous pursuit of both objectives had only made sense if the Red Army had been decisively defeated, and as the year drew on it was clear that this was not the case. Even when supplies were available, the attempts to mount diverging operations placed intolerable strains on combat units – the Luftwaffe could
provide air support for attacks in the Caucasus or in Stalingrad, but not for both at the same time.

The long flank running from Voronezh to Stalingrad began to look increasingly vulnerable. With the bulk of Army Group B’s German formations engaged in the huge battle on the shores of the Volga, security for its flanks passed to the Romanian Third Army to the northwest and the Romanian Fourth Army to the south. The Third Army consisted of ten divisions, covering a front of about 100 miles (170km); the Fourth Army was still in the process of completing its assembly in late November 1942, with seven divisions covering an even greater distance of 120 miles (200km). Beyond the Romanian sector to the north was the Italian Eighth Army of ten Italian and two German divisions, followed by the Hungarian Second Army of 12 Hungarian and two German divisions. Politics
played a part in the manner in which Germany’s allies lined up along the Don. At the end of the First World War, Romania seized the region of Transylvania from Hungary, and there continued to be considerable enmity between the two nations. Consequently, it was considered expedient to ensure that their troops did not come into contact and the Italians were inserted between them.

Had any of these allied armies been supported by strong German armoured forces, or had they been present in sufficient strength to have substantial reserves behind the front line, or if more German formations had been intercalated amongst them, the troops from Germany’s Axis partners – weak in modern artillery and anti-tank guns, and almost devoid of modern tanks – might have been able to defend their positions reliably. Instead, it became increasingly clear to both the Germans and the Russians that the sectors of the front held by the Romanians in particular represented a great opportunity for a counteroffensive.

The sectors either side of Stalingrad lay within relatively easy striking range of the Don estuary and the Sea of Azov – a successful Soviet advance to the coast might result in the isolation of both Army Groups A and B. Even if the Red Army could not reach the coast, it might encircle Sixth Army in Stalingrad, and if the Soviet forces could reach Rostov, they would be astride the long supply lines on which Army Group A in the Caucasus was dependent.

Even while the battle for Stalingrad was coming to a climax, the Red Army was beginning to test the flanks of the great salient that ended at the city. The German XIV Panzer Corps was tasked with defending the immediate northern side of Stalingrad and came under repeated heavy attack during September. Although all attacks were beaten off, there was a heavy cost, as Oberst Hans-Jürgen Dingler, a staff officer with 3rd Motorised Division, recorded, highlighting that it was not only the Red Army that was hampered by poorly trained replacement drafts:

During these attacks our position seemed hopeless on more than one occasion. The reinforcements in men and material we received from home were insufficient. Those men who had no previous battle experience were quite useless in this hard fighting. The losses they suffered from the first day in the fighting line were staggering. We could not ‘acclimatise’ these people gradually to battle conditions by attaching them to quiet sectors, because there were no such sectors at that time. Nor was it possible to withdraw veterans from the front to give these raw recruits thorough training.29

General Gustav von Wietersheim, commander of XIV Panzer Corps, was amongst several senior commanders to express concern about the exposed flanks of the Stalingrad bulge. With Sixth Army proving incapable of suppressing the
last pockets of resistance within the city and his own divisions being steadily worn down, he expressed doubt that he would be able to hold the northern flank of the salient indefinitely, particularly as the line further to the northwest was now defended by the weak Romanian Third Army. Wietersheim wrote to Paulus, his superior, suggesting that it would be safer to conduct an orderly withdrawal back to the line of the Don, where defences could be organised with greater confidence. However, this would entail abandoning the shattered ruins of Stalingrad and there was no possibility of Hitler ever agreeing to such a move, now that possession of the city had assumed such importance. Wietersheim, who had clashed with Hitler before the war and was clearly no favourite of the Führer, was dismissed and replaced by General Hans-Valentin Hube, whose 16th Panzer Division was part of XIV Panzer Corps. General Viktor von Schwedler, commander of IV Corps and heavily involved in the increasingly futile slaughter in Stalingrad, specifically highlighted the peril of concentrating strength at the point of an attack that had failed – a ‘dead Schwerpunkt’ – and advocated the movement of major forces to protect the flanks of the bulge, if necessary by pulling out of Stalingrad itself. He too was dismissed. Field Marshal List, commander of Army Group A, was removed for failing to achieve the conquests expected of him, even though he had been deprived of air support and supplies in favour of Stalingrad, and Hitler took direct command of the army group himself. Halder, the increasingly embattled chief of staff at OKH, whose relationship with Hitler had deteriorated badly through the second half of the year as the magnitude of the risks faced by the Wehrmacht grew ever clearer, was also sacked.

The post that Halder had occupied was hugely influential and everyone – including Hitler – was aware that it was a potent counter-weight to the Führer’s military sway. Consequently, there was considerable interest in who should replace Halder. Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, the head of OKW (Oberkommando der Wehrmacht, ‘Armed Forces High Command’, the replacement for the war ministry and with overall command of German military operations outside the Eastern Front), urged Hitler to appoint Field Marshal Erich von Manstein as Halder’s replacement. Like Vasilevsky, Manstein would be a key personality in the coming battles; the contrast between his origins and those of Vasilevsky could hardly be greater.

Born Fritz Erich Georg Eduard von Lewinski, Manstein was the tenth child of a Prussian general. His mother’s sister, married to Georg von Manstein, was unable to have children and adopted the youngest of the Lewinski children, together with another cousin, an arrangement that was relatively commonplace
at the time. Although he was aware that the Mansteins were not his natural parents, he always referred to them as ‘mother’ and ‘father’ and adopted their surname without hesitation. The family – both natural and adoptive – had extensive military links; one of his uncles was Paul von Hindenburg, who would win fame as an army commander in the First World War and would play a pivotal part in Hitler’s rise to power when serving as president of Germany. As was usually the case with Prussian families, Manstein effectively joined the army as a child when he went to the junior cadet school in Holstein aged only 12; later, he became a page at the royal court and then joined the 3rd Prussian Foot Guards. In 1911, he was appointed adjutant to the regiment’s fusilier battalion, and when he departed two years later to join the Königlich Preussische Kriegsakademie (‘Royal Prussian War Academy’) in Berlin to commence training as a staff officer, his battalion commander described him in glowing colours as the best adjutant he had ever known.30

Amongst Manstein’s contemporaries in the academy were Heinz Guderian, who would lead German armoured troops with such distinction in the Second World War, and Erich Hoepner, under whose command Manstein would serve during the first months of Barbarossa. After completing only one of his three years in Berlin, Manstein’s studies were interrupted by the outbreak of war. He joined the 1st Guards Reserve Division and took part in the successful reduction of the Belgian fortress of Namur before his division was transferred in haste to the Eastern Front. He was involved in fighting in Poland in late 1914 and was wounded, spending the next six months recovering from shoulder and knee injuries. Thereafter, he held a number of staff posts both in the east and the west. After the defeat of Germany, he demonstrated what would become one of his hallmarks: precise and detailed staffwork, produced quickly, on this occasion to organise the withdrawal of the division in which he was serving back to Germany.

Like many Prussian officers, Manstein found the abdication of the Kaiser deeply unsettling. The entire officer corps had regarded itself as bound by personal allegiance to their monarch, and now faced the difficult task of transferring their loyalty to the state. Ultimately, it was this sense of loyalty that was exploited by Hitler with the personal oath of allegiance, something that proved to be an almost insurmountable barrier for most officers when it came to trying to overthrow the Führer. But in 1918, such considerations lay far in the future. Manstein became a member of the Reichswehr, serving in a variety of roles before joining the Truppenamt (‘Troops Office’, the title under which the general staff – banned under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles – continued to function) as head of the operational planning staff. Here, he drew up plans for how the
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Reichswehr – restricted to only 100,000 men – could be expanded rapidly into a much larger army should the need and opportunity arise. He was also involved in developing close cooperation with the Soviet Union, which allowed Germany to evade many of the restrictions imposed at Versailles.

Hitler’s accession to power occurred when Manstein was a battalion commander in Kolberg on the Baltic coast. Like many Prussian officers, he found the Nazis generally distasteful, and when Goering visited the town, Manstein used the opportunity to make a small gesture of protest; instead of reporting to Goering with his honour guard, Manstein instructed the guard party’s officer to report to the regimental commander, who then invited Goering to inspect the soldiers. It was only the smallest of snubs, but some have seen in this the roots of Goering’s antipathy for the future field marshal.31

Manstein’s intervention on behalf of a part-Jewish doctor in Kolberg, a decorated veteran of the First World War who was being threatened with dismissal by local Party authorities, also did little to endear him to the Nazi hierarchy and in 1934, when he became chief of staff to Wehrkreiskommando III – the military district responsible for the Berlin area – he wrote to General Ludwig Beck, chief of the Truppenamt, to protest about regulations that forbade Jews from becoming or remaining officials either in the civil service or the military. However, these acts do not necessarily reflect a rejection of Nazi ideology regarding the Jews; the letter to Beck accepted that the legal and medical professions contained far too many Jews and that they would have to be ’cleansed’, but regarded military duty as a different matter entirely. Soldiers were expected to be willing to lay down their lives for their nation, argued Manstein, and should therefore not be placed in a position where someone might question their right to be regarded as full citizens. He suggested that the Wehrmacht should be responsible for deciding the fitness or otherwise of those within its ranks to continue in service, based upon whether the individuals concerned had behaved consistently like pure-blooded Germans and possessed no foreign characteristics that might affect their behaviour. Even with these dilutions and qualifications, Manstein’s letter led to some, including General Werner von Blomberg, the German War Minister, to contemplate disciplinary action. Beck – protecting his protégé in the same manner that Shaposhnikov protected Vatutin during Stalin’s purges – succeeded in preventing any action being taken, and it was the last time that Manstein ventured into such political hot water.

In 1935, Manstein continued on his rising trajectory and became head of the general staff’s operations branch. This was a period in which radical ideas
about armoured warfare were clashing with more traditional views, and perhaps for the first time in his career Manstein found himself holding a different opinion from his conservatively minded mentor, Beck. Manstein accepted Guderian’s views about independent panzer divisions forming the spearhead of the army, but also campaigned for armoured support for the infantry. This led to a paper in 1935 in which he started by reminding readers that mobile horse-drawn artillery had been added to infantry divisions in 1918 to help them overcome resistance from improvised defences, which – particularly if they possessed a few machine-guns – could bring an advance to an abrupt halt. With the advent of mechanised warfare, Manstein argued that there was a need for motorised assault artillery. After some initial resistance, the concept rapidly gained ground and the first turretless Sturmgeschütz or assault guns began to enter service in 1937. Manstein had wished to have a battalion of three batteries – each with four or six assault guns – per infantry division, with additional assault guns assigned to panzer divisions, but providing so many weapons and crews was beyond the resources of German military industry, especially at a time when the Wehrmacht was expanding at a huge rate. The assault guns were ultimately deployed mainly in independent battalions, but consistently proved to be powerful assets both as infantry support and in anti-tank roles.

Manstein’s time in the operations directorate was followed by a spell as deputy quartermaster-general, and thereafter he was appointed as commander of 18th Infantry Division, replacing Hermann Hoth, who would cross paths with Manstein in the critical weeks of late 1942 and early 1943. In 1938, Beck urged his fellow senior officers to resign en masse in protest at Germany’s slide towards a war that he was convinced his nation would lose; unable to persuade them to stand by him, he resigned alone in August and commenced on a path that would lead to his involvement in, and death as a consequence of, the July Plot of 1944. Manstein regretted both his own posting to 18th Infantry Division and Beck’s resignation, not least because he had aspirations of replacing Beck personally one day. Instead, the post went to Franz Halder, creating considerable ill will between the two men.

As war approached, Manstein became chief of staff of Army Group South, which would be led by Generaloberst Gerd von Runstedt into Poland. He drew up the army group’s operational plans, involving the concentration of its armoured assets in a powerful drive on Warsaw, and his rapid and innovative staffwork helped turn the crisis caused by a Polish counterattack into a decisive victory during the Battle of the Bzura. It was an important moment in the development both of Manstein and the German Army, as he later wrote:
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[The battle] was not one which could be planned from the outset through penetration of the enemy front by powerful tank formations, but arose from counter-moves made on the German side when the enemy’s own actions unexpectedly gave us our big opportunity.34

It was this ability to improvise during operations, and the leadership skill to execute such improvisations, that was as much a part of Germany’s early successes in the war as the panzer divisions; they were powerful weapons, but it was the flexible manner in which they were wielded that led to victory. But whilst this observation by Manstein is entirely accurate, his further comments – that ‘the troops had a purely military battle to fight, and for that reason it had still been possible to fight chivalrously’ is naïve at best and utterly misleading at worst. Whilst later fighting in the east was on a far more brutal scale, the Polish campaign and its aftermath were marked with widespread atrocities against the Poles, and although the SS played a leading role in these, many Wehrmacht units, notably in Manstein’s Army Group South, were also involved. Leni Riefenstahl, the German film director, visited the front line and witnessed either the killing of a group of Jews in Końskie or its aftermath; Manstein blamed the incident on a nervous officer who over-reacted to panic in the town. He added in his memoirs that the officer was court-martialled and sentenced to demotion and imprisonment but that such measures were undermined by Hitler, who frequently issued pardons and in 1941 removed the right of the army to prosecute cases involving civilians on the Eastern Front. Whilst it is true that Hitler did issue pardons in such cases, there is also evidence that on this occasion, prosecution only occurred at the insistence of Riefenstahl.35 In any event, this episode surely falls far short of the ‘chivalrous’ conduct of war that Manstein described.

With Poland defeated, attention turned to the west and a further opportunity arose for Manstein to demonstrate his growing expertise. On 9 October, Hitler issued a directive relating to the further prosecution of the war. He started by stating that if France and Britain were not willing to discuss peace after the fall of Poland, he wished to strike as soon as possible – delay would benefit the enemies of the Reich more than the Reich itself. To that end, an offensive was to be launched on the northern flank through Luxembourg, Belgium and the Netherlands as early as possible, with the intention of defeating as large a part of the forces of the Western Powers as could be accomplished, while securing sufficient territory to protect the Ruhr and to allow further conduct of the war against Britain – i.e. the capture of the channel coast.36 OKH accordingly prepared a preliminary document outlining what would effectively
be a mechanised version of the Schlieffen Plan that had failed to knock out the French in 1914, the main difference being that the flanking movement would also incorporate the Netherlands. Manstein was unimpressed by this proposal and on behalf of Rundstedt’s army group he submitted a series of memoranda criticising the plan. He argued that it represented what the Western Powers would expect and was likely to run out of steam somewhere in northern France, perhaps leading to the same drawn-out war of attrition that had occurred in the First World War. There were perhaps also personal issues at stake: the OKH plan would see Army Group B, facing Belgium and the Netherlands, as the primary attacking force, leaving Rundstedt’s Army Group A, further south, to play only a supporting role, though the arguments submitted by Manstein and Rundstedt were strictly professional and logical. Furthermore, rather than aiming for what would at best be only a partial victory, Manstein argued that Germany should seek to lure British and French forces into Belgium and then annihilate them. This would leave France fatally weakened and unable to continue the war. To that end, he and Rundstedt proposed that Army Group B should make its attack appear to be the main effort, while Army Group A would concentrate its striking power for a powerful thrust through the Ardennes and Sedan to the channel coast in northern France.

Unsurprisingly, OKH was unimpressed by this radical proposal, arguing that there was insufficient strength available in Army Group A for such an operation. Manstein responded (on behalf of Rundstedt) that this could be achieved by transferring more forces to the south. But if OKH was not enthusiastic about the plan, Hitler thought otherwise. In November, he authorised the creation of a mobile armoured group for an advance on Sedan under the command of Guderian. When Manstein discussed the matter with Guderian, the latter replied that an advance through the Ardennes was perfectly possible, but should be conducted by a strike force of not just some of Germany’s panzer divisions, but as many of them as possible. Discussions continued through the winter, and on 25 January there was a particularly heated encounter between Brauchitsch, the commander-in-chief of the army, and the senior officers of Army Group A; perhaps in response to this, Manstein received a new assignment just two days later, as commander of XXXVIII Corps in Stettin, far from the impending campaign.

By this stage, even Halder – who had initially been scornful about Army Group A’s proposals – was coming to the conclusion that the proposed armoured force for the thrust to Sedan was too weak and would require far more force, thus effectively shifting the main effort from Army Group B to Army Group A.
The critical moment came on 17 February when Manstein and a group of fellow officers were invited to a working breakfast in Hitler’s Reichskanzlei (Reich Chancellery). Manstein was asked to stay when the others left and had a long discussion about the plans for the west. The result was the adoption of Manstein’s plan for an operation through the Ardennes to the channel coast via Sedan. Whilst Manstein had shown great skill in improvising during the Battle of the Bzura the previous year and had played a leading role in the operational plans of Army Group South prior to the invasion of Poland, this was the first time that he had devised an operation making use of most of Germany’s mechanised forces, and against a far more formidable foe than the brave but outgunned Polish Army. The success of the German attack through the Ardennes, codenamed Sichelschnitt (‘sickle cut’), demonstrated his mastery of operational thinking at every level, combining an accurate assessment of the striking power of mechanised troops, the value of surprise, the use of air power to substitute for slower moving artillery, and how to interpret his shrewd assessment of the expectations and intentions of the enemy.

Manstein’s XXXVIII Corps played no role in the dramatic dash to the channel in the opening phase of the great campaign in the west. Instead, his divisions were in the second echelon and were tasked with defending the southern flank of the advance. By the end of May, he was involved in fighting off disjointed British and French attempts to strike at the Somme crossings, and in June he led his infantry corps in a swift advance across France. He had no armoured forces under his command, so he improvised as best he could; using what vehicles were available, he created motorised detachments that pushed ahead as rapidly as possible, leading personally and urging his tired men forward in the ideal manner of an outstanding officer, setting an example for others to emulate. His observations serve as a summary for anyone aspiring to leadership in any role, military or otherwise:

The example and bearing of officers and other soldiers who are responsible for leadership has a decisive effect on the troops. The officer who in the face of the enemy displays coolness and courage carries his troops with him. He also must win their affections and earn their trust through his understanding of their feelings, their way of thinking, and through selfless care for them.37

The speed of advance of Manstein’s infantry was astonishing. They swept forward over the Somme, Seine and Loire, some foot elements covering over 40 miles (70km) per day, and averaging about 18 miles (30km). The feat earned him the
Knight’s Cross; he had demonstrated in just a few months that in addition to being an original and innovative operational planner, he was also a master of the tactical battle. After spending much of the rest of 1940 preparing his corps for an amphibious assault on the English coast, he was transferred east in early 1941 to take command of LVI Motorised Corps, later renamed LVI Panzer Corps. It was a command that he had long desired and one he embraced with enthusiasm.

LVI Motorised Corps consisted of 8th Panzer Division, 3rd Motorised Infantry Division, and 290th Infantry Division. In the coming attack on the Soviet Union, its primary task was to secure crossings over the Daugava gorge at Daugavpils, and the manner in which this was executed highlighted all the strengths of German command and training. True to the principles of Auftragstaktik (‘task-oriented tactics’), Manstein specified what was required without dictating how it was to be achieved and gave his subordinates freedom to innovate as required. Generalmajor Erich Brandenberger, commander of 8th Panzer Division, rapidly switched the axis of his attack when the initial main thrust ran into strong resistance and proceeded to burst through the Soviet defences, spreading confusion and chaos as his troops surged forward, reaching and capturing the crossings at Daugavpils within four days – an advance of 196 miles (315km). Despite both his flanks being completely exposed, Brandenburger, with Manstein’s knowledge and consent, gave his men freedom to proceed at full speed, relying on confusion and pace for security. Thereafter, progress was slower – Hoepner, Manstein’s superior, demanded a pause while neighbouring units caught up, and the Red Army began to recover its balance – but the true source of the reluctance to press on was almost certainly higher. Field Marshal Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb, commander of Army Group North, was from the conservative wing of the army and unwilling to allow Hoepner’s two motorised corps to thrust into the Soviet hinterland alone; in any event, logistic difficulties made the pause inevitable.

Shortly after, Manstein’s troops came under attack from the Soviet Eleventh Army, commanded by Vatutin – the first encounter between the two men on the battlefield. The German 8th Panzer Division suffered heavy losses and was removed from Manstein’s command, and he spent an increasingly frustrated few weeks dealing with mutually contradictory tasks – on the one hand, Hoepner’s panzer group (as panzer armies were known at the time) was meant to lead an advance to Leningrad, but on the other hand the rapidly diverging axes of attack along the entire front required the panzer divisions to be used to help maintain continuity, particularly in the face of repeated Soviet counterattacks. Shortly after defeating one such counterattack and effectively destroying General Kusma
Maximovich Kachanov’s Thirty-Fourth Army – which resulted in Kachanov being court-martialed and executed – Manstein was assigned to a new command: he was sent south to lead the German Eleventh Army, tasked with the conquest of the Crimea.

Manstein’s new command was largely infantry, and it took him several months to achieve his objectives. At first, it seemed as if the Germans might overrun the entire Crimea before the end of 1941, but the casualties suffered by Manstein’s divisions and amphibious counterattacks by the Red Army resulted in much of the initial German gains being overturned. Eventually, with substantial air support, Eleventh Army was able to subdue the eastern Crimea in May 1942 before turning to the fortress of Sevastopol, widely regarded as one of the strongest fortresses in the world. In the face of heavy resistance and considerable casualties, Manstein carefully unpicked the city’s defences, completing its capture in early July, for which he was promoted to field marshal.

With this triumph in siege warfare behind them, Manstein’s troops were to be deployed in the far north to repeat the feat by capturing Leningrad; it was at this point that Halder was dismissed, and Manstein’s name was suggested as a replacement. Despite many feeling that Manstein was the best candidate as chief of staff at OKH – indeed, that he should have been given the post in preference to Halder when Beck resigned – Hitler rejected the suggestion on the grounds that Manstein was needed for the planned campaign in the north. The true reasons are probably far more complex. Manstein now had a reputation as perhaps the best strategist and operational expert in the army, and Siegfried Westphal, who as a staff captain had been his subordinate in the years before the war, sums up many of his characteristics:

[He] was a pleasant man, a military genius. He demonstrated that in every position during the Second World War. He worked unbelievably quickly; impatiently, he couldn’t stand long presentations. He was a generous superior officer, a complete gentleman, but an uncomfortable subordinate. He didn’t have too many friends amongst his peers.38

On an earlier occasion – at the end of 1941 – when Manstein’s possible transfer from the Eastern Front to high command in Berlin had been discussed, Hitler had also been ambivalent, telling Halder that whilst Manstein was a genial personality, he was too independent to fit comfortably with the manner in which the Führer worked.39 It was therefore no surprise that Keitel’s suggestion of Manstein replacing Halder was turned down. The new chief of staff at OKH
would be General Kurt Zeitzler, a man who had held a succession of staff posts in which he had excelled and had a reputation as a logistics expert, and was a far more pliant individual than Manstein. For the moment at least, Manstein remained with Eleventh Army.

On 26 October, a day after he had attended the funeral of Leutnant Pepo Specht, a favourite aide-de-camp who was killed in an air crash while en route to take up a new post, Manstein flew to Vinnitsa where Hitler had established his headquarters to receive his marshal’s baton personally from the Führer. The independent-minded field marshal took the opportunity to have a frank discussion with Hitler about the growing weakness of German infantry divisions:

With such high losses as we were bound to have in the east while fighting an enemy as tough as the Russians, it was vitally important that the infantry regiments should always be brought back up to strength with the minimum possible delay. But when replacements never arrived on time – and none had ever done so since the Russian campaign began – the infantry had to go into action far below their proper strength, with the inevitable result that the fighting troops became more and more worn down as time went on.40

What particularly irritated Manstein was the fact that there were plenty of personnel available to make good the losses of the infantry. The Luftwaffe had long been regarded as lavishly over-manned by the army, and there were repeated proposals for 170,000 men to be transferred to the army after the Russian campaign began. Goering was unwilling to lose such a large body of men and persuaded Hitler to authorise the creation of 22 Luftwaffe field divisions instead, on the grounds that Luftwaffe personnel were politically more attuned to National Socialism than the army, which remained suspiciously conservative as far as the Party was concerned. Manstein had no doubt that this decision was sheer folly:

Considering what a wide choice had been open to the Luftwaffe in making its selections for these divisions, they were doubtless composed of first-class soldiers. Had they been drafted to army divisions as replacements in autumn 1941 to maintain the latter at their full fighting strength, the German Army might well have been saved most of the emergencies of the winter of 1941–42. But to form these excellent troops into divisions within the framework of the Luftwaffe was sheer lunacy. Where were they to get the necessary close-combat training and practice in working with other formations? Where were they to get the battle